

Firestarter by echovalley26809

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Summary:

Eleven aims all her mental energy at the empty can of Coke. Specifically, she's trying to make it float, but she'll take any kind of movement - a crush, a squeeze, a skittering across the counter like it's just been slapped, or even just a single, little twitch.

Instead, it bursts into flames.

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El's powers come back different.

1. Chapter 1

After the mall, everything starts to change very fast.

Soldiers and government agents swarm the town, and while they're mostly concentrated at Starcourt, they regularly pop up elsewhere, including Melvald's and the police station (much to Hop's annoyance), and Eleven has been given strict instructions to stay away from anyone with a badge or a uniform who isn't named 'Hopper'.

At the same time, everyone in Hawkins finds out the police chief has a kid.

It happens because once the gate is closed and the Mind Flayer is gone, most of the party ends up at the hospital in various states of injury. Hop gives El's name as 'Jane Hopper' and while none of the doctors and nurses seem to notice, her friends' parents *definitely* do.

Joyce looks concerned. Hop just sighs.

Later, he tells El that 'our cover is about to be blown' so they have to start telling the story they came up with months ago to explain who Eleven is and where she came from. Basically, that Hop and Mama are her 'biological' parents, and she lived with Mama until Mama got sick and couldn't take care of her anymore so now she lives with her dad.

It's simple because Hop says simple stories are more believable. And if anyone asks for details, Hop tells El to tell those people to 'mind your own business'.

Mostly, though, she ends up just trying to avoid other people. Hop's plan that everyone will be too preoccupied by 'all the other shit going on' to pay much attention to Eleven's existence doesn't quite work out, and while El is no stranger to stares and whispers, just because it's familiar doesn't mean she enjoys it.

(She hears Hopper complaining to Joyce that people have been eaten by monsters — "Actual *monsters*!" — but all anybody in this 'goddam

town' cares about is the police chief's 'secret love child'.

Whatever a 'love child' is.)

So El spends a majority of the days immediately following 'the mall incident', as people are calling it, holed up in Mike's basement with her friends. She and Mike are technically still broken up and El doesn't know if they're going to get back together and it's honestly hard to think about that when so much else is going on. They're still friends, though. So. It's fine.

Dustin is obsessed with using Cerebro to eavesdrop on all the government communications currently happening in Hawkins. He records hours of what he thinks could be coded government messages and he constantly makes them all listen to the tapes, even though nothing he captures sounds much like Bad Men-speak to Eleven.

(He keeps trying.)

Lucas is worried about Max. El is worried about Max, too. Max is sad because Billy's dead, even though she never liked him all that much. She spends a lot of time having dinners at Lucas's house, a lot of time sleeping over at El's house, and a lot of time not talking about her brother.

El understands. She has plenty to not talk about, too.

Hanging out with Max so much also makes it easier for Eleven and Will to avoid each other, which they've kind of been doing lately because Hop and Joyce are going on dates now and it's *weird*.

The first one happens on that Friday, and Hop comes home in a good mood with plans for a second date, which happens the following week, and he comes home from that in another good mood with plans for a third, and so on.

("Do I change my name if you marry Joyce?")

"What? Why would you change your name?"

"Mike said girls change names when people get married."

“*Marriage* is *not* something you should be talking about with Wheeler!”)

Mostly El tries to ignore it.

On top of everything else, the cabin is busted, even worse than that time Eleven got mad and broke all the windows, and so Hop and El start packing and moving all their stuff into a little trailer next to a lake.

“I thought you live in the cabin?” El asks.

“When we needed somewhere to hide, I lived in the cabin,” Hop says. “But now that we’re not hiding anymore, I figured we should start living in my actual house.”

The trailer is... rough.

The couch is ripped up and there’s glass on the floor and the lights don’t work and the TV is held together with tape and the wallpaper is not only peeling but sliding off the walls in sheets and Hop tells her not to look under the sink because ‘something might be growing under there’ and the carpet is stained and a weird smell lingers in the musty air.

“Did the Mind Flayer attack here, too?”

“Ha, ha, very funny.”

And El’s powers are still gone.

“They’ll come back,” Hopper (Mike, Owens, *everyone*) says. “Just give it time. Like after the gate, yeah?”

“*Not* like after the gate,” El tries not to shout, while also trying not to cry, as she concentrates on a broken piece of plaster, willing it to *move*, or *shatter*, or do *anything*. “I am *tired* after the gate. I am not tired now. I’m... empty.”

The debris remains motionless.

Hop sweeps it into a dustpan. “Trying to force it isn’t gonna do you

any favors. You've just got to be patient. Now come on, are you helping me clean or what?"

He tosses a rag at her, and as the government cleans up Hawkins, El and Hop clean up their little trailer. It's easier than cleaning the cabin, because although the trailer is bigger and there are a lot more broken things, at least this time Hop doesn't have to stop every few minutes to show her what a broom is or how to use a sponge. He can tell her to sweep the floor without explaining what 'sweep the floor' means or hand her a full garbage bag with the silent expectation that it will be taken outside rather than abandoned in the middle of the living room. It speeds up their progress significantly — in a single day and night, they're done, and an afternoon later, they're completely moved in.

Though it's far from the spotlessness of Mike's house, the trailer looks a lot better when all the junk is cleared out. Calling it home might take some getting used to, but she's got a room here, too, and the refrigerator is full of food she likes, and there's a lake where Hop promises to teach her how to fish.

Besides, Hop says a home isn't a place. A home is people.

And anyway, he fixes the cabin, too.

Just in case, he says.

El doesn't have to ask, *just in case what?*

The lab is also active for the first time in months. Somewhat active, at least. Black cars pull up to the abandoned, vacant building, and groups of men and women in suits stand around talking to each other before disappearing inside. A while later, they come out again, talk some more, then get back in their cars and drive away.

They do this a few times.

El is more than a little disturbed by this development. She hides in the trees and watches the activity from afar, though she can't tell what they're doing or hear what they're saying. What she can see is

that they're bringing nothing — no boxes, no supplies — in and taking nothing out. She doesn't know what that means, except that it doesn't seem like they're planning to stay.

Hop, also unsettled by the odd series of meetings at the lab, opts for a much faster and easier method of getting information: asking Owens.

Owens tells Hopper, who tells Eleven, that the 'higher-ups' just want to check that the lab's still properly boarded up and empty since Hop said that's where he crossed paths with one of the Russian operatives. Once they deem it secure, they'll leave for good. Nobody's interested in reopening or restarting any of the old projects.

Nothing to worry about, Hopper says. So, El tries not to.

Word-of-the-day: culture shock.

It's technically two words, but it's in the dictionary like it's one word, so El thinks it counts. And it's the only word (*phrase*) she can find that adequately explains her feelings over the past couple of weeks.

The difference might seem subtle, but there's actually quite a big contrast, El discovers, between the independence she had as a semi-fugitive, where she had to avoid crowds and interactions with other people, and the completely open latitude she's allowed to experience now, where very little is off limits.

The movie theater. The arcade. The library. Even the grocery store and post office.

Hell, all of downtown Hawkins, in the middle of the day, without any kind of disguise or made-up backstory about being Mike's second cousin from Sweden.

(She lets herself remember a snippet of an old rhyme from a repetition game that she and Papa used to play —

From there to here,

From here to there,

Funny things are everywhere.

— and, for just a moment, she wonders what Papa would think of her now.)

Hop says she still has to follow rules and can't get 'totally drunk on freedom' and 'do whatever you want all the time'. The government is still after her, she still has a curfew, and she still has to take as few risks as possible. But the plan going forward is way less 'life on the lam' and way more 'normal '80s kid'.

El almost gets dizzy thinking about it. This is everything she's wanted since Hop found her in the woods.

Her friends argue, loud and long, about the first movie she should see in a theater, the first game she should play at the arcade, the first meal she should eat in a restaurant, etc. Apparently, not only are the experiences themselves very, very important, but so is the order in which they occur, and despite Dustin's insistence that the movie should come before the arcade (for vague 'graphics'-related reasons), the arcade comes first.

It's loud, and bright, and colorful, and *awesome*. It reminds her of the mall more than anything else, and just as she let Max pull her around to all the different stores, she lets her friends pull her around to all the different games. The first one she ever plays, with her friends crowded around her, is something called 'Pac-Man', which is about a hungry little circle that she has to guide through a maze full of monsters. Lucas calls it 'a rite of passage' and she likes it well enough but honestly it's the friends part that matters way more to her than the game part.

Dustin gives a rundown of other games she could try, punctuated with his own colorful commentary — 'Centipede' is 'awesome', 'Dragon's Lair' is 'for experts', and 'Dig Dug' is 'bullshit'.

"Oh, what's wrong, Dusty-bun?" Max asks in a sarcastic, mocking tone. "Still mad that I beat your high score?"

"You know what? Let's go. You and me, Max. Right here, right now. All or nothing."

“Fine. Bring it.”

“I gotta see this,” Lucas says. They’re joined by Will, too, but Mike rolls his eyes and nudges Eleven, gesturing for her to follow him.

“We can watch Max and Dustin play if you want, but it’s your first time here and you shouldn’t have to stand around watching other people if you don’t want to. You should get to play.”

“Okay,” she says.

Mike sets her up with ‘Space Invaders’, a game where Eleven has to shoot different colored dots, which are supposed to be aliens that also shoot at her little dot, which Mike says is a ‘laser cannon’. She gets sucked in quickly, even though she’s not very good at it, and lets out a grunt of frustration every time she gets hit. When it’s ‘game over’, Mike passes her more quarters for another round.

In the middle of a particularly successful run, El’s tiny laser cannon gets nailed by a shot from the aliens and ‘dies’.

Game Over.

Again.

And El, finally starting to understand the same specific kind of aggravation caused by video game mishaps that her friends have experienced for years, gets pissed.

“Whoa, hold up.” Mike suddenly pulls her away from the game. His eyes are fixed on a spot above the screen, and when El looks up, she sees the machine is smoking. On the screen, the graphics flicker in a way that doesn’t seem to be on purpose. “Um, Keith?” Mike calls.

A person previously pointed out to her as the ‘asshole manager’ unplugs the machine and slaps an ‘out-of-order’ sign on it. No one seems bothered by the loss of Space Invaders, or the possibility of a game spontaneously combusting.

“It’s probably just overheated,” Mike says.

El nods, though she can’t shake the odd feeling that Mike is wrong

and something else is going on. “Yes.”

They regroup with their friends back at Dig Dug, where Max is poised to beat her own high score while Dustin rants about an ‘unjust universe’ and Lucas and Will alternate between cheering on the former and trash-talking the latter. As the game ends with a new first place and Dustin’s score officially pushed to third, he falls dramatically to his knees and shouts, “Why, God, why?” until Keith comes over and threatens to kick him out for being ‘annoying’ and ‘loud as shit’.

And Space Invaders, at least for a while, is forgotten.

The first movie she ever sees in a theater ends up being something called 'Back to the Future', which Dustin says he only partially got to watch when he was hiding from the Russians but that it comes ‘highly recommended’ by Steve. There’s a lot in the story that El feels like she’s not getting, especially when the rest of the theater laughs at something she doesn’t recognize as funny, but honestly, like the games in the arcade, the movie itself isn’t important. She’s just excited to be out with her friends.

Eleven sits in the middle, between Max and Mike, and Will and Dustin sit on Mike’s other side while Lucas sits on Max’s other side, and the giant bucket of popcorn they all pitched in to buy sits on El’s lap.

Halfway through the movie, Dustin whispers for El to pass the popcorn. She gives the bucket to Mike, who gives it to Will, who gives it to Dustin, who exclaims, “Holy shit, it’s still hot,” loud enough for the strangers sitting in front of them to shush him.

Later, Lucas asks for the popcorn, and the bucket is again passed down the line from Dustin to Will to Mike to El to Max to Lucas. He stuffs a handful in his mouth, makes a face, and then leans across Max and El to glare at Dustin. “You said it was hot.”

Dustin shrugs. “Snooze you lose.”

Eventually, the bucket makes its way back to Eleven.

By the end of the movie, the popcorn is hot again.

“How hard is it to put dirty clothes in the hamper? It takes two seconds.” It’s laundry day, and Hopper’s annoyed because instead of being in the hamper like they’re supposed to be, El’s clothes are strewn throughout her bedroom. He picks up a shirt off the floor and drops it into the empty basket. “See that? Two seconds.”

“Yes, I see,” El responds, not actually looking, as she scrambles to collect every piece of clothing that needs washed before Hop suddenly decides she can do her own laundry.

He drops another shirt into the basket. “Look at that. Another two whole seconds.”

She pushes him out of her room. “Five minutes. Please?”

“Five minutes,” he agrees. “But if your stuff’s not in the washer by the time the machine starts, you’re on your own.”

This is not an empty threat, Eleven knows, and she quickly makes the rounds, tossing anything that looks at least halfway in need of a cleaning into the hamper. Dresser, floor, closet, bed... She stops at her bed.

Tiny, black, flecks of... dust (?) (maybe?) are on her pillowcase.

On closer inspection, she realizes they look like scorch marks. Like the marks that Hop’s cigarettes make when the ashtray is overflowing and he puts them out on the edge of the coffee table.

El is pretty sure Hop’s not putting out cigarettes on her pillows.

Dreams — *nightmares* — sometimes caused a middle-of-the-night nosebleed that she wouldn’t realize happened until she found the spots of blood on her pillow the next morning. Whether a similar phenomenon is responsible for these marks, El doesn’t know, but she thinks that wouldn’t make sense — her powers cause nosebleeds, not... whatever this is.

“El! I’m turning on the washer!”

Eleven almost trips on herself in her rush to get her laundry in on time. When she returns to her room, she flips the pillow over.

While she realizes that something weird is going on, Eleven also isn't keen on looking too closely at whatever it is, lest it disrupts her newfound freedom. So she tries to convince herself that it's just her powers coming back, though if that is true, it's happening very differently compared to every other time she's worn her battery down to the dregs.

Either way, she decides, for the most part, to put it out of her mind.

Until something happens and she can't anymore.

She's on her way out the door to meet her friends at Mike's house when Hop grabs the back of her shirt and tells her to 'hold your horses'.

"I ate breakfast," El protests. "I am allowed to go to Mike's house."

"I'm aware. But if you wait a minute, I'll give you a ride. And we can stop by the station on the way."

"To meet your friends?"

Hop has mentioned taking Eleven to the police station a few times, often complaining that someone named Flo 'won't stop nagging me about it', but El is still a little surprised that he's actually going to do it.

He's been nervous lately, ever since they started telling people their 'story'. More nervous than usual. Checking locks, closing curtains, setting early curfews. It reminds El of those early days in the cabin, when he acted like he half-expected the Bad Men to come knocking down their door at any moment.

The Bad Men — at least, *those* Bad Men — are gone. But the fear holds on.

Or maybe his hesitation is because of Eleven. Maybe he looks at her and also remembers those early days in the cabin, when she jumped

at every sound and tensed at every touch.

Maybe he can tell she's nervous, too.

"They're not my friends," Hop says as he puts his boots on. "They're the people I work with."

"Steve works with Robin. They're friends."

"Well, we can't all be like Steve and Robin."

Hop's police truck has mostly been fixed since the engine exploded after it was shot up by the Russians, though the engine makes a funny noise now. And the longer the truck is running, the louder the funny noise gets, so in order to drown it out, El has to keep turning the volume up on the radio, which means by the time Hop pulls into the parking lot, the high note in Bohemian Rhapsody is shaking the windows.

The radio cuts out when Hop takes the key out of the ignition, and the silence rings in Eleven's ears almost as much as the music did.

She doesn't say anything, but Hop knows what she's thinking.

"Don't worry," he says. "They have to like you. I'm their boss."

El's still worried. She's always worried when she has to talk to someone outside of the party because she isn't good at conversations and new people always ask her a million questions and use words she's never heard before and she's been meeting so many new people lately that the stress never seems to end.

(Dustin's mom asked questions forever, even as Dustin tried to cut her off and pull El down the hall to his room. Mike's mom asked questions she couldn't answer about her old town and her old school and her old friends, none of which exists. Lucas's mom offered her pie.

She likes Lucas's mom.)

The people Hop works with at the police station, however, don't try to talk to El about school, or hobbies, or anything hard like that.

Instead, once introductions are made, most of the conversation revolves around one subject: making fun of Hop.

“Hey Little Hopper, you sick of eating TV dinners yet?” Powell asks. “‘Cause I’m pretty sure that’s all Big Hopper knows how to cook.”

“TV dinners and takeout, right Chief?” Cal says.

Hop looks put out. “You guys don’t know what you’re talking about. I made omelets last night and they were delicious.”

“He burned them,” El says, making Powell and Callahan laugh.

Flo, the lady that Hop said wouldn’t stop nagging him about meeting Eleven (or Jane, as Hop calls her at the station), puts her hand on El’s shoulder and asks, “Do you like chicken? I’ll bring over a casserole.”

Before El can answer, Hop interrupts. “Don’t do that. We eat fine.”

El’s a little miffed at that. Chicken casserole sounds good and Flo is nice. Plus, Joyce brought cookies over just a few days ago and Hop didn’t seem to mind then. “Why?” she asks. “You let Joyce bring us food.”

“Okay, time to go,” Hop announces as the officers crack up. “C’mon, kid.”

Their goodbyes are a lot hastier than their hellos, Eleven notices, and Hop’s face is red as they make their exit. Powell and Callahan shout at her to ‘don’t be a stranger’ and ‘we got so many stories about your dad’ and maybe something else but she can’t understand it over Hop telling her, “Don’t listen to them,” as he ushers her out the door.

Back in the truck, El gives Hop a wry smile.

“What?” he asks.

“They’re your friends.”

Instead of responding, Hopper turns the radio on and flips the channel to one that plays awful music. El flips it back.

“Nope,” Hop says, flipping the channel back again. “It’s my turn.”

“What? No.” She reaches for the dial and Hop blocks her hand.

“Yeah, we listened to your terrible opera singer all the way here, and now we’re gonna listen to something good.”

El doesn’t particularly want to listen to what Hop thinks is good music, so does something she always used to do, at least before her powers disappeared, which is attempt to change the radio station with her mind.

(It used to drive Hop crazy.)

She’s expecting the same effect she’s been getting since the mall — a big fat nothing — but to her surprise, something’s there. The muscle is active. Weak, but active, instead of listless and inert the way it has been for weeks.

The music turns to static for a moment. Hop slaps the front of the display.

“Stupid busted shit,” he mutters.

“Do people have to call me Jane?” El asks, partly an attempt to distract him from what she’s trying to do to the radio and partly a legitimate question. Every new person she gets introduced to as ‘Jane’ and not ‘El’ and never ‘Eleven’.

“You can tell people to call you whatever you want. Although you probably shouldn’t say that El is short for Eleven.”

As El keeps trying to mentally twist the dial to change the station, the music blips out for just a second before coming back. “What is El short for?”

“Oh, it can be anything you want...” Hop starts listing a variety of girl names that El is barely listening to as she concentrates on the dial. *Just turn*, she thinks. *Right or left doesn’t matter. Turn.* “...lots of people go by middle names, you know, so...”

El pushes harder, but the dial doesn’t turn.

What happens instead is, the singer's voice becomes garbled, and then flames erupt out of the radio.

"Jesus!" Hop shouts and yanks the steering wheel, bringing the truck to a very ungraceful stop on the side of the road.

In one deft motion, he unbuckles El's seatbelt, reaches across her to open her door, and shoves her out of the truck. He's not very gentle about it, and she hits the ground hard, but she forgives him because the truck is on fire and the fire is her fault. And even despite the weirdness, despite knowing that something odd was going on, this is still kind of the last thing El expected to happen.

She's never, ever, one time, in the lab or out of the lab, started a fire with her superpowers.

Until now.

Hop yells into his walkie-talkie that he needs a fire engine sent to his location immediately.

"Are you okay?" he asks Eleven. She nods, and he gestures for her to move away from the truck as he continues talking to the dispatcher. "No, we don't need an ambulance."

Hopper doesn't assume that the surprise fire was caused by his kid's surprise superpowers. Rather, he figures the blaze was the result of the 'shoddy mechanic work' that was meant to fix the engine that got shot up over the Fourth of July, and El, who doesn't correct his assumptions, figures she can't keep pretending that everything is normal.

(Or as normal as it gets, at least, for her.)

She asks Hop to buy Coca-Cola at the grocery store, and even though she tries to be as casual about it as possible, the magnitude of the request doesn't escape his notice.

"I thought you hated Coke."

He knows that her dislike of Coke has something to do with her time

in the lab, but that's primarily based on her agitation toward seeing the red cans in the refrigerator and subsequent refusal to talk about it. She's never shared with him exactly what happened.

That's usually how it goes, when it comes to the lab. He makes guesses, takes note of the things that piss her off, and she either deflects his rare question or, even more rarely, answers.

Right now, she just shrugs.

He hesitates for a moment, probably considering pressing her about it, but apparently deciding not to. "You sure?"

Eleven nods. "Please?"

"Okay."

"You have to get cans. Red cans."

"All right."

He comes home one night with a box of 'New Coke', which isn't exactly the same but Eleven thinks is close enough, and she waits until he leaves for work the next morning to open it. The flavor doesn't matter — she has no intention of drinking any — and the contents of the first can she grabs go directly down the drain in the kitchen sink. El sets the empty can in the middle of the counter and sits herself on a stool in front of it.

Just like in the lab, she tells herself.

Eleven aims all her mental energy at the can. Specifically, she's trying to make it float, but she'll take any kind of movement – a crush, a squeeze, a skittering across the counter like it's just been slapped, or even just a single, little twitch.

Instead, it bursts into flames.

Though she half-expected this to happen, the shock still makes her push back from the counter and sends her tumbling backwards off the stool. Upon hitting the floor, she scrambles to get her feet under her and grab a glass from the sink to quickly fill with water, dousing

the blaze before it catches the whole kitchen on fire.

And really, she should have had some kind of fire extinguisher on hand in the first place.

When the fire's out, El refills the glass and cautiously approaches the blackened, smoking can. Reaching out with one hand, she pokes it. It's very hot, and she pulls away before she gets burned.

Mentally, she also pokes it, more gently than the first time, and watches it slowly reignite. She tries to put it out the same way she started it — with superpowers — but the flames only burn bigger and brighter, and Eleven has to dump the second glass of water over the already-soaked kitchen counter.

The fire disappears, again, and the water spills over the edge of the counter and drips onto the floor. El stares at the mess and sighs, begrudgingly grabbing a towel to sop up the deluge.

(In the lab, other people always cleaned up the messes her superpowers made.)

With the counter dry once more and the charred remnants of that first can swept into the trash, El digs the rest of the New Coke out of the fridge and pours it all down the drain, lining up the empty cans in a row on the edge of the sink.

And one at a time, she sets each can on fire and knocks them into the basin with a spatula until the sink is filled with smoldering, molten scraps of metal.

El observes her handiwork and tries to decipher how all of this is making her feel. It's hard sometimes to identify her own emotions when her instinct more often than not is to fall back on the detachment that allowed her to survive so long in the lab, the occasional explosive outburst notwithstanding.

Standing over the sink, she's able to suss out some curiosity, some amazement, a little bit of suspicion, and a whole lot of confusion.

Fear is there, too. But fear is always there.

El turns on the faucet to extinguish the fire in the sink, which prompts a thick cloud of smoke to quickly engulf the kitchen, making her cough and setting off not only the smoke detector in that room, but, as the smoke travels, nearly every smoke detector in the house.

She sighs.

Once the smoke clears, El takes the batteries out of all the smoke detectors, leaving them in a pile on the table. She also drags the big square fan from Hopper's room into the kitchen and sets it up at an angle, so any smoke will blow right out of a window that she has conveniently opened just for that purpose.

And then she expands her investigation to beyond New Coke cans.

Tissues, toothpaste, napkins, glass, an old shirt, an old sock, Band-Aids, Eggos, records, cassettes... None of it moves. But it all catches fire.

No headaches. No nosebleeds.

Eleven doesn't know what it means. Nothing like this has ever happened before, nor had she ever been lead to believe it could happen. All the tests in the lab were centered around finding things, moving things, or killing things, and while those didn't always go according to plan, she doesn't ever remember anyone making the suggestion that she might be able to set things on fire.

If she could make fires back then, or if Papa and the Bad Men believed she could, then she thinks they would have forced it out of her, like they forced everything else. But they never did, so this deviation might have surprised them as much as it's surprising her.

And that leaves the question, where does it come from?

By the time Hop gets home, the trailer is clean, the fan and smoke detector batteries are back in place, the table is set for dinner, and El is trying to appear as nonchalant as possible while she fiddles with a combination lock that she's planning to use on her locker at school.

"What's that smell?" Hop asks.

Though she scrubbed out any traces of fire as best she could, El could not completely excise the odor it left behind. Like ashes. Or soot.

She thinks fast. "I burned dinner."

That's not even a lie (El thinks she probably should have used the oven instead of setting the pan on fire), and Hop, who knows not to complain about food someone else makes for you, doesn't ask any more questions about it.

He grabs a beer from the fridge, but before closing the door, he pauses for a long moment, staring into the refrigerator, and Eleven goes still as Hopper pulls out the now-empty New Coke box. The same box that was full just that morning, before he left for work.

Shit.

"Did you drink this entire case?" he asks.

El thinks faster and, this time, resorts to lying. "My friends came over."

Dropping the box on the counter, Hop nods like he believes her and takes his seat at the table. "Your friends are gonna eat us out of house and home."

Friends don't lie hangs over her head as they eat, and Eleven passes the rest of the evening in silence and shame.

She should tell Hopper.

Since the mall, he's made her promise that if any more 'weird shit' happens that 'puts you or anyone else in danger', she has to find him and tell him right away, no matter if he's in Illinois or 'all the way out in, I don't know, Australia or something, okay?'

("Why you're in Australia?")

"Would you just promise me, please?")

This definitely qualifies as 'weird shit', El thinks. But it's not putting

anyone in danger. At least not yet. Or, at least, not that she knows of.

El's reluctant, though, to lay something so big on him so soon after so much has just happened. Part of her is also worried that he'll be concerned enough about this new development to decide that she can't go to school and her freedom will revert back to the 'cabin rules'.

And, quite frankly, she's also afraid of being put right back under a microscope.

Because the thing is, El does trust Hop. Really. But 12 years of learning to mistrust authority is hard to shake off, and that's also compounded by the knowledge that when Will was having problems after his time in the Upside Down, Hop and Joyce took him — repeatedly — to the lab.

Now the lab is closed, but if the lab was just the lab, then she and Hop wouldn't need a 'story' and she wouldn't need to worry about being discovered and they would have more people in the government to trust than just Owens.

Bad Places and Bad People still exist. And even if they didn't, and even if the whole government was full of 'trustworthy' people, Eleven simply has no desire to be the subject of scrutiny anymore.

She needs to tell someone, though, and surprisingly, the someone she tells is Will.

They're not the closest — they're not even close — but he's the one who's had the most contact with the Upside Down, and Eleven's working hypothesis at the moment is that this is all somehow connected to the Mind Flayer bite on her leg.

It doesn't hurt anymore, hasn't for weeks, and is completely healed over, but it's the most direct cause-and-effect she can think of, and didn't Will get true sight after his own experience with the Mind Flayer? And while part of her hopes that chapter is closed for good, part of her also hopes her new abilities are a result of the Mind Flayer's influence, as scary as the possibility is. Because if they aren't, then she's left with no explanation at all, and that might be scarier.

He's the only one home when El gets to the Byers house. Joyce has been doing a lot of 'double-shifts' since the mall closed and everybody flocked back to downtown, and Jonathan has been back with the newspaper taking pictures with Nancy since their old boss was eaten.

Will's surprised to see Eleven alone, without the rest of the party, on his front porch.

"Is everything okay?" he asks.

"I need to talk to you," she says.

There's a second's hesitation, and then he opens the door wide, a wordless invitation that El accepts, and he leads her down the hall to his room, where they sit on the bed and Will stares at her expectantly. "What's going on?"

Eleven just comes out with it. "My powers are different."

"Your powers came back?"

"Came back *different*."

"Different how?"

Showing is easier than telling, so El looks around Will's room for something she can set on fire. Not wanting to destroy something he actually cares about, and remembering how Hop used to burn garbage out in the woods back when they lived in the cabin, El pulls the trash can out from under Will's desk.

It contains exactly one crumpled up piece of paper.

Before Will can do anything, Eleven grabs it and unfurls it, preparing to set it alight, when she sees what's on it and stops. It's a drawing of that final fight in the mall, with the Mind Flayer towering over people that are very clearly identifiable as the members of the party and a collage of fireworks in the background.

It's very good.

Will snatches the paper out of her hands. “That’s nothing.”

El didn’t mean to embarrass him and doesn’t know what to say, so she moves on like the moment didn’t happen.

“Do you have something you don’t care...” She pauses, trying to find the right word. Will waits patiently. “...burns?”

Minutes later, an empty tissue box has been reduced to a few smoking flakes of cardboard in the Byers’ sink, and Will is staring like he doesn’t know whether what he just witnessed is awesome or worrisome.

Then the smoke detector goes off.

“Those are very annoying,” El says.

“Yeah, sorry,” Will says, even though it’s her fault, as he drags a chair under the smoke detector so he can turn it off. “So, how long have you been able to do that?”

“I don’t know. Since the mall. Maybe.”

“And you’ve never done anything like that before?”

“No.”

Will hops off the chair. “You think this is because of the Mind Flayer. That’s why you’re talking to me instead of talking to Mike or Max.”

“Yes.”

Thinking for a moment, he smiles like he wants to reassure her. “I don’t think this is the Mind Flayer.”

“Why?”

“He likes it *cold*.”

This is a good point that Eleven hadn’t considered. All of the abilities Will acquired were in some way helpful to the Mind Flayer, and El can’t think of how the Mind Flayer would find the ability to make

fires helpful, especially when fire seems to be the only substance capable of hurting the Upside Down.

Unfortunately, it also means that El has absolutely no clue where these new abilities come from.

“Then what is it?” she asks.

Will shrugs. “Maybe it’s something you always could do and just didn’t know it.”

This is another good point. El has a history of doing things she didn’t know she could do right up until the moment she does them, like... well, like opening a portal to another dimension. And then closing a portal to another dimension.

Will sits down backward on the chair he used to turn off the smoke detector and leans across the top rail. “You don’t want to tell Hopper, do you?”

El wonders if part of Will’s true sight is being able to see right through her as well as into the Upside Down. She averts her eyes and doesn’t answer.

“You can tell my mom,” Will offers. “She’s really good at listening, and she won’t get freaked out or anything.”

The problem isn’t that Hop is bad at listening or would ‘freak out’. The problem is Eleven’s worry that this will somehow lead to her being hooked up to machines, locked up in a room with a glass partition between her and people in white coats, and the ‘normal ‘80s kid’ life is pushed out of her reach forever.

Hop wouldn’t let that happen, she thinks with less certainty than she’d like.

“Just think about it,” Will tells her, and El tries to forget that he sounds like her own conscience.

Will convinces her to tell the rest of their friends, at least, and immediately it becomes apparent that everyone has clashing opinions

about her new powers.

“Oh my God, this is the coolest thing I’ve ever seen,” Dustin says.

“You need to tell the chief,” Lucas says, looking worried. “Like, *now*.”

They’re in the cabin, because that feels like the right place to be for something like this. It’s private. Safe. No smoke detectors to kick up a fuss about the sudden presence of flames. And since most of the furniture has been moved to the trailer, there are fewer things to accidentally set on fire.

The prime location, however, doesn’t prevent her friends from breaking out into an argument.

Max crosses her arms. “I’m pretty sure that’s her decision, not yours.”

Mike, who’s thinking along the same lines as Eleven, says, “But if she tells Hopper, he might not let her go to school. He might not let her go out at all anymore.”

“You were the one who was yelling about brain damage back when we needed to find Billy,” Lucas points out. “How is this different?”

Max flinches at the sound of her brother’s name. El thinks she might be the only one who noticed.

“It’s different because...” Mike falters.

“Because...?” Lucas presses. And when Mike fails to answer, Lucas adds, “You know I’m right.”

“You don’t know there’s anything wrong with her. You’re not a doctor!”

“Neither are you!”

Dustin steps between Mike and Lucas, holding his arms up like he’s mediating a debate. “Okay, guys, I think we’re losing sight of what’s really important here, which is that El can start fires with her mind, and that is awesome.”

“You’re not helping,” Mike says.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Should I be freaking out about brain damage instead? Is that helpful?”

Max snaps back to the conversation. “Nobody should be freaking out about anything because nothing’s wrong. El’s nose isn’t even bleeding.”

Lucas shakes his head. “I’m sorry, it’s just... this is weird. No offense,” he adds quickly, to El. She just shrugs, an unspoken *none taken* clear-cut in the air between them. “And when weird stuff happens, usually bad stuff happens next.”

There’s not a whole lot anyone can say in response to that. El glances at Will, who has thus far stayed quiet, and she doesn’t know how to interpret the face he’s making but it might mean he thinks Lucas is right. Weird stuff does usually lead to bad stuff, even when the weird stuff seems harmless, like Dustin finding baby Dart, or the magnets falling off of the Byers’ fridge, or a kid in a hospital gown showing up at Benny Hammond’s diner.

Even if this isn’t the Mind Flayer, that doesn’t mean it couldn’t be something worse. Maybe something else from the Upside Down, or from an entirely new dimension they don’t even know about. Eleven feels the anxiety bubble up again and wishes that something can just be weird for once without putting everyone’s lives at stake.

“Okay, but, *but*, think about this,” Dustin says. “*Flamethrowers.*”

Pushing his bike instead of riding it, Mike walks Eleven home after the group disperses from the cabin. “So that was...” he starts.

“Awkward,” she finishes.

“Yeah, awkward,” Mike agrees. They amble through the woods, bypassing the roads for a shorter, more direct route, even though any time they save is lost by Mike having to maneuver his bike between trees and over uneven terrain. He dislodges the front wheel from the crevice of a large root and then blurts out, “I don’t think you have

brain damage.”

El isn't sure what to say in response. “Okay?”

“When I said that, I just meant that people shouldn't expect you to do everything, especially if you're tired or hurt or something. I don't think there's anything wrong with you. I'm *positive* there's nothing wrong with you. And Lucas is a jerk for assuming that there is just because —,”

“Mike,” Eleven interrupts. He stops, waits. “Are you scared?”

“Kind of,” he admits. “Are you?”

“Kind of.”

“It'll be okay,” he says, immediately snapping back into reassurance mode in spite of confessing his own ‘kind of’ fears. “Even if it's bad. We've been through bad stuff before, right?” Mike's smile is drawn from sincerity, and El wishes she had his faith.

“He's right.”

“Who's right?”

“Lucas. And Will. I have to tell Hop.”

Mike still doesn't like it, she can tell, but he also doesn't disagree. “Yeah, well, Dustin's right, too. It is cool. You're like the Human Torch. Or Firebird.”

“Firebird?”

“She fights with the Avengers, but she's got her own team, too. She's kind of new, so there aren't as many stories about her.” Eleven helps Mike lift his bike over a moss-covered log. “Do you want me to go with you? To tell Hopper?”

El shakes her head. “I can do it. I can tell him. I'll tell him.”

Eleven doesn't tell Hopper.

Hopper just sort of accidentally finds out.

It's after dinner, and Hop's washing the dishes while Eleven sits at the table and, resolved to tell him in the morning, takes a break from superpower-related thoughts to read a student handbook for Hawkins High School that she found in a box of Hop's old school stuff. He told her to throw the box out — instead she put it in her room and has been picking through the contents, curious not only about school but also about Hop's own rarely-discussed youth.

Out of everything, the handbook seems the most immediately relevant, so she takes it and leaves the rest — crumpled pages torn out of yearbooks, a faded Hawkins High t-shirt, etc. — for later.

The handbook, however, turns out to be more confusing than helpful.

“What's ‘shirttails?’”

Hop looks up from the sink, where he's up to his elbows in soapy water. “What?”

“Shirttails must be tucked in at all times,” El reads out of the handbook.

“It's, uh, part of the shirt that hangs down. Below the waist.”

El doesn't remember ever seeing her friends with their shirts tucked in, except at the Snow Ball and after Will's funeral, but those were what Hop calls ‘special occasions’, and whatever criteria exists for special occasions, regular school days don't seem to meet it.

She turns the page and keeps reading. “Do you know this song?”

“What song?”

“‘Hawkins High Fight Song’.”

“Kid, what are you reading?” El turns the cover toward him. When he sees what it is, he smiles like he wants to laugh. “That's probably a little outdated.”

“‘Outdated?’”

"Means old and unusable. That thing is from at least 30 years ago. Where'd you even get it?"

"Box," she offers without elaboration, and he doesn't ask for any.

"Well times have changed since then, so I wouldn't count on that to tell you what high school's really like."

The phone rings. El ignores it.

"Kid. Phone."

The phone is over on the coffee table and nowhere near either of them. Eleven keeps her focus squarely on the page in front of her detailing all the clubs that students can join. AV Club is not listed, but something called 'Homemaking Club' is. "You get it."

"I'm doing the dishes."

"I'm doing research for school."

El flips the page and reads the rules for athletics, which apparently only boys are allowed to do. The phone keeps ringing.

"It might be Mike," Hop says, trying to entice her.

"It might be Joyce," El retorts.

She frowns as she turns another page and finds that the next few have been ripped out. She'll either have to comb through the box again and hope the missing pages are in there or learn to live without knowing what kind of haircuts are appropriate for students.

"Seriously, El. Answer the phone. I'm not gonna ask you again."

Eleven doubts that very much and continues perusing Hopper's outdated student handbook. Flipping the pages back and forth, she realizes the entire book is out of order, with whole sections having pulled loose from the binding. Some fall out and onto her lap.

"El! Now!"

Maybe if she wasn't so distracted, maybe if Hop didn't shout, maybe if she hadn't been so stubborn, maybe if the phone never rang at all, maybe if she had told him sooner, maybe if a lot of things happened differently then she might not have done what she does next.

Which is use her mind to pull the phone to her.

'Muscle memory', Hop calls it. After her powers disappeared, Eleven couldn't stop trying to mentally close doors or pick up things she dropped. More than once, she's made herself comfortable on the couch in front of the TV having forgotten that she needs the remote now to turn it on or change the channels.

It's kind of embarrassing, every time it happens.

She's not embarrassed now, though. She's horrified as she remembers far, far too late that the phone, like the radio in Hop's truck, like the New Coke cans, like the Byers' tissue box, isn't going to move.

It's going to — and does — catch fire.

Eleven freezes and glances at Hopper. Maybe he hasn't noticed.

He has.

Like her, he's rooted to the spot and staring, flabbergasted, at the burning phone that's still ringing, very distorted but ringing nonetheless. El flicks her wrist, attempting to put the fire out, but instead accidentally conjures flames all the way across the coffee table.

Bad news: the coffee table is now on fire.

Good news: that seems to shake both Hoppers out of their shock and sends them in separate directions — El to the sink for a glass (or a pot) of water, and Hop to a closet in the back of the trailer.

With impeccable timing, Eleven finishes filling up one of the larger pots with water just as Hop emerges with a fire extinguisher, and in their hurry, they collide in the kitchen. Eleven drops the pot, spilling water all over the floor, which Hop slips on and slams his knee against a chair, prompting an impressive string of curse words to fly

out of his mouth as El takes the fire extinguisher from him, points it at the blaze, and squeezes the lever.

Nothing happens.

Hop reaches around her and pulls a pin out of the top of the hose, and El squeezes the lever again, spewing a cloud of whatever's inside a fire extinguisher that stops fires.

The phone, blackened and warped, finally quits ringing. The coffee table is soggy and gross, which is an improvement over being charred to a crisp. The water on the floor spreads to the boundary between the kitchen and living room and seeps into the carpet.

But Hop isn't staring at the mess. He's staring at Eleven.

"I have to tell you something," she says.

2. Chapter 2

Dr. Owens stares, a little dumbfounded. “Huh.”

He’s on one side of the table and El’s on the other, with a smoking pile of ash that used to be an old towel on the surface between them. Hopper leans against the wall and doesn’t say anything. Joyce looks worried.

They both look worried.

El hates everything about this.

They’re in the Byers house, which is supposed to be both a ‘neutral’ and ‘secure’ location since Eleven won’t let Owens into any house she currently lives in and the police station has too many people coming and going and Owens doesn’t exactly have an office in Hawkins anymore with the lab empty and closed. It’s an imperfect compromise, because the Byers house is still an extension of El’s social territory, even if she doesn’t actually live there, and Owens’ presence is still a kind of violation of the boundaries that El has drawn around normal life.

Normal being relative, in this case.

Honestly, though, they could have arranged to meet Owens anywhere and Eleven would have sulked and complained and dragged her feet the whole way. She understands why Hop and Joyce wanted to call the doctor, yet this is exactly what El didn’t want to happen.

She doesn’t care that Owens has been useful in the past and she doesn’t care that he got her a birth certificate and she doesn’t care that he’s one of the good guys now and she doesn’t care that he’s supposedly here to help.

He’s from the lab. Not the lab as El knew it, but the lab nonetheless.

What do people’s intentions matter when you’re led back to the exact same place you were running away from?

Owens holds up a tiny flashlight, the kind that doctors shine in

patients' eyes, and says, "If I could just..."

El shakes her head.

Accepting her terms, he holds his hands in mock surrender and puts the light away. Casually resting his chin on one palm, his elbow propped against the table, Owens thinks for a moment, opens his mouth like he's going to say something, and then slowly closes it, frowning in consternation.

"Huh," he says again.

"Well?" Hop asks, sounding like he's losing patience.

Owens hems and haws. "Well... eh... boy, you guys really like the curveballs, don't you?"

It is a 'rhetorical question', which means no one has to answer. And nobody does — Hopper makes a not-very-pleased face at Joyce, who shrugs but looks just as frustrated. Owens, glancing between them, clears his throat and asks Eleven directly, "So, no nosebleeds? At all?"

It's a real question this time, but El still doesn't respond, choosing instead to stare at the table.

Hopper sighs. "El."

She knows he wants her to answer Owens, but El doesn't see why she has to be part of this discussion. She's already told Hop everything, and there's no real reason, in her opinion, why Hop can't simply pass the information along. In the lab, Papa was always the one who talked to the other Bad People, either behind the glass partitions where she couldn't hear or in rooms with long tables that El only ever caught a glimpse of before someone closed the door or someone else led her away.

No one but Papa had ever really cared what she had to say. No one even viewed her as a source of information.

"El," Hop repeats as the silence continues. "Can you please answer Dr. Owens's question?"

Eleven throws a stony glance toward Owens. “No.”

“No headaches? Leg not causing any trouble?”

Under Hopper’s raised eyebrow, El begrudgingly shakes her head.

“No nothing, huh?” Owens drums his fingers on the table. “And when did this start, exactly?”

Her gaze drifts toward the front window — Will’s outside, on the porch, waiting for her makeshift, secret doctor appointment taking place in his dining room to be finished so afterward they can together meet the rest of their friends at Mike’s house. El told Will he doesn’t have to wait, but he does anyway.

“El,” Hopper prompts. Again.

“He already asked that,” she tells Hop.

“You’re right, I’m sorry, I’m just trying to make sure I understand the timeline,” Owens says. “You said it started after the mall, right? Do you know how long after the mall?”

El shrugs, exaggerating the motion as she glares at Hop. He pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Just sometime in the last couple of weeks. And it works the same...” Owens points to his own head. “...it’s the same mechanism? That hasn’t changed?”

El crosses her arms and leans her head back on the chair to stare at the ceiling. Hopper, who by now seems to understand that this is going to take all day if he keeps trying to prod answers out of his kid, speaks for her.

“She said she’s doing the exact same thing she’s always done before. Except now, instead of moving stuff, it’s...” Hop gestures to the ashes in the middle of the table.

“Fire,” Joyce finishes.

There’s a long, uneasy silence.

Owens leans forward, folding his hands together. "Okay. Honest opinion? I really don't think this is anything to worry about."

"You don't think this is..." Joyce hesitates, glancing at Eleven. "...odd?"

"I didn't say that. I'm saying it's probably nothing to worry about."

Joyce scoffs, unimpressed. "*Probably.*"

"Nothing to worry about like those rotten pumpkins were nothing to worry about?" Hop asks pointedly. "Nothing to worry about like Will's flashbacks were nothing to worry about?" Owens looks like he wants to interrupt, but Hop doesn't give him the chance. "Nothing to worry about like the new mall was nothing to worry about?"

"You are asking me to fly a little blind here. If you're interested, I've got a couple of colleagues, very discreet, who can run a few basic tests and get you all the answers you want."

"No," El says before anyone else can speak.

Owens shrugs. "Well, then, this is what I got."

His 'don't worry about it' diagnosis isn't exactly upsetting but a continued lack of explanation is also not really the answer that anyone was hoping for. Hop and Joyce still look worried, and Eleven feels the same pull of dread that emerged when she showed her friends her new powers.

Deciding this meeting is over, she turns to Hopper. "Can I go?"

For a moment, he regards her with an inscrutable expression, and El has the fleeting thought that he might not allow her to leave. "Yeah. You can go."

She books it for the front door before anyone can change their mind.

"You know..." Owens starts. El pauses with her hand on the doorknob. "...it's possible, maybe even probable, that the umbrella of what constitutes your, um, unique abilities is a lot wider than anybody anticipated. Maybe this is a completely natural

development. Just a thought.”

She gets what he’s saying, even if she doesn’t quite get all the words, and she thinks it’s the first semi-helpful thing that Owens has said or done all morning. The achievement is muted by the fact that Will suggested the idea first.

Without another word, El pulls the door open and goes outside, leaving the grown-ups to discuss whatever it is they want to discuss. Will, sitting on the edge of the porch, jumps up when he sees her.

“Are you done?” El nods. Will climbs onto his bike, El climbs on behind Will, and they’re on the road when Will half-turns his head and asks, “What did Dr. Owens say?”

“Nothing to worry about.”

“That’s good, right?”

El would like to think so, but she’s unsettled by everyone’s — Hop’s, Joyce’s, her own — apparent dissatisfaction with the doctor’s verdict. And she automatically considers all of Owens’ actions and statements at least somewhat suspicious. “Does Owens lie?”

“Um, I don’t think so. Sometimes I got sent out of the room while he talked to my mom and Hopper, but I don’t think he would say there’s nothing to worry about if there was something to worry about.”

“Hop looked worried. Your mom looked worried.”

“My mom always looks worried.”

They coast along the winding roads of Hawkins against a backdrop of deep green and sweltering temperatures, hallmarks of late summer in Indiana. And even now, nearly two years on, when they ride into town, El remembers with emotional precision that first ride into town, on the back of Mike’s bike, and the first sight of civilization.

It’s overwhelming, still. Maybe it always will be.

“Owens thinks like you,” she tells Will as he turns into Mike’s and Lucas’s neighborhood.

“How’s that?”

“That I always can make fire.”

“Well, it makes sense, doesn’t it? Fire is a chemical reaction that happens when you mix something flammable with oxygen and heat, but all you’re really doing is speeding up the molecules to the point of combustion. Most people would use some kind of heat source to do that. Like a match or a lighter or something. But if you can move the molecules yourself, that should work, too. I mean, I would think.”

‘Molecules’, El knows, are the stuff that everything is made of. It’s a term from one of the old science books that Hop brought home as part of their plan to catch up her education enough to go to school. There are even smaller things, called ‘atoms’, and because of their size, Eleven never before thought of either molecules or atoms as tangible objects, like a toaster or a pillow, and able to be moved like Will described.

But she supposes they must be if they’re what toasters and pillows are made of.

“You think I move molecules?”

“I think if you can use your mind to move something big, you can use your mind to move something small.” Will pedals up Mike’s driveway and adds one more member to the familiar cluster of bikes already waiting next to the garage. “If you can flip a van, you can start a fire.”

While it makes sense, it doesn’t answer why El can’t seem to flip a van — or anything else, for that matter — anymore. All they have are guesses, which her friends, far more convinced by Owens’ *don’t worry about it* than anyone who was actually there when he said it, are more than happy to discuss, analyze, and expound upon.

“Radioactive spider bite. Exposure to radioactive waste. Galactic cosmic rays...” Dustin briefly looks up from the list of theories he’s been working on, “...which is basically space radiation...” and then goes back to reading. “Radioactive —,”

“Is there anything on that list that doesn’t involve radioactivity?” Max interrupts.

Dustin scans the front of the piece of paper, then turns it around and checks the back. “No.”

“Wouldn’t she have Spider-Man’s powers if she got bit by a spider?” Lucas asks.

El lets them carry on for a while. They’re excited, she knows, and relieved that probably nothing is wrong, and usually Eleven doesn’t mind them talking about her superpowers, but they never used to talk about her superpowers *this* much, and she kind of hopes now that they get it out of their system sooner rather than later.

She kind of hopes things go back to normal, soon.

“Maybe it’s like those people who hit their head and get really good at math and stuff,” Max suggests.

Clicking a pen, Dustin points at Max and scribbles something on his list of theories. “Mr. Clarke might know more about that kind of thing. We could ask him.”

“You want to ask Mr. Clarke why our friend with superpowers suddenly has new superpowers?”

“*Obviously* we would leave out the superpowers, genius.”

Even Mike gets caught up in it.

“What about Will’s theory?” he asks. “It makes way more sense than anything else.”

This is true, El thinks. Although fun, about half of the theories her friends come up with are outlandish enough to be dismissed out of hand, and none of them sound as plausible as Will’s theory.

“Will’s theory doesn’t explain why now,” Max points out. “Or why all her other powers are still gone.”

This is also true, and it occurs to Eleven that they might never know

the why.

Dustin studies the ever-growing list of theories and strokes his chin thoughtfully. “We need more data.”

El tenses. She doesn’t really like the sound of that, as it feels a little too reminiscent of the conference with Owens at the Byers house that she just left, which itself felt a little too reminiscent of all those long years in the Hawkins lab.

Nobody means to make her mad, El knows. But she decides to cut the conversation short before it takes a hard turn in an uncomfortable direction. “Can we eat?”

“I second that,” Lucas says.

Will raises his hand. “All in favor of food, say aye.”

Multiple hands go up. “Aye!”

“Fine,” Dustin says, dropping the pen and stuffing the list of theories back into his pocket. “We’ll revisit this later.”

Eleven doesn’t doubt it.

Unbelievably, she still gets to go to school.

“Really?” El asks breathlessly, hardly daring to believe it’s not somehow a trick or a misunderstanding. Hop seems a little confused at her incredulity.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t you?”

His confusion confuses her. “Fire,” Eleven says like it’s obvious.

“Okay, well, it was floating stuff before, and that wasn’t gonna stop us, right? Just, don’t start fires at school. Or anywhere else.”

They go ‘back-to-school shopping’ (even though this is technically Eleven’s first time going to school), which means they go to Melvald’s and El meanders around the store, tossing pens and pencils and

notebooks into a basket, while Hopper stands in one place near the entrance and flirts with Joyce.

He's not being very helpful, but Eleven doesn't think she needs much help until she goes down one aisle and finds shelves full of peculiar supplies — calculators, checkered paper, geometric stencils, etc.

She isn't sure what she needs.

“Dad?”

Most of the time it's Hop or Hopper, but occasionally it's Dad. There's no rhyme or reason to it — ‘Dad’ has just as much chance of flying out of her mouth after a nightmare as it does when she's asking him to pass the TV remote. El knows Hop likes hearing it, knows he calls her his daughter without any hang-ups, and sometimes she tries to make a cognizant effort to say it more, but it's hard. El thought of him as her friend for so long that making the transition to family is kind of jarring, even months later, and kind of makes her self-conscious.

Especially now, in a town full of people who still think it's a novelty that the police chief is parent to a teenager. Eleven looks up to see a couple of ladies standing at the end of the aisle, staring at her, and it makes her want to fold up into herself.

They're friends, Papa once told her about staring people, without bothering to explain what ‘friends’ means.

“Just ignore them,” Hop says now as he walks up behind her, his hand a comforting weight on her shoulder. “What do you got?”

She points at the display. “Math stuff?”

A new ruler, protractor, and a compass that doesn't look anything like the compasses her friends used to find the gate all join the items in the basket.

“Is that it?”

“I think so.”

While Joyce checks them out at the cash register, the ladies who were staring at her get in line behind them and... keep staring. El tries to ignore them, but her face flushes with embarrassment.

“When will they stop?” she asks Hop after they exit the store.

“Give it time. They’ll get bored of you just like they get bored of everything else.”

El wonders if the kids at school will stare as much as the grown-ups do and if she’ll have to wait for them to get bored, too.

Out of nowhere, days after their meeting with Owens, Hopper tells El that he thinks she should do some of the medical tests that the doctor suggested, and they end up getting into a really stupid fight about it.

They’re in Hop’s truck — which still runs, though as a result of its accidental combustion the radio is permanently broken and the occasional waft of smoke puffs out of the vents — and on their way to pick up pizza for dinner at the Byers’.

“I just think if something is wrong, then it’s better to know now and try to fix it than ignore it and let it get worse,” Hop is saying. “And if Owens thinks —,”

“Owens said ‘don’t worry.’”

“Yeah, but —,”

“Are you worried?”

Hop sighs and taps the steering wheel. “I am a little bit. If you’re sick —,”

“Not sick.”

“Can I talk? Please?” El turns away from him and leans against the window, glaring out at Hawkins. Hopper takes her silence as an indignant assent to his request. “If you’re sick, then we need to figure out how to get you the help you need, but we’re not gonna be able to help you if we don’t know what’s wrong. And Owens isn’t gonna

know if anything's wrong if we don't do any tests."

Eleven doesn't know why Hop thinks Owens is somehow going to be more helpful post-medical testing than he ever has been before (the procurement of her birth certificate notwithstanding), but Hop's greater point, about making sure nothing's actually wrong with her, does make sense.

She's still not doing it.

"Can I talk?" El asks in a pointed mimicry of his earlier words.

Her mocking doesn't escape his notice. "Yeah, go ahead."

She takes a deep breath as if she's preparing to give a long speech and then just says, "No."

Hopper frowns and shakes his head a little but doesn't say anything.

He pulls the truck into the parking lot of the pizza shop and tells Eleven to wait while he goes inside and pays for the food. Minutes later, he comes outside with multiple pizza boxes, and when he climbs back into the truck, he slides the boxes onto Eleven's lap. "Hold those, please."

El peeks into the top box. "Did you —,"

"I got your favorite, yes."

After pulling out of the parking lot, they ride in silence for a few minutes, which makes Eleven think that the conversation about the hospital stuff is over, but before long, Hopper brings the topic back up.

"Look, I understand why you don't want to go," he starts.

"Genius," El mutters. It's a new word with conflicting definitions — in the dictionary, it means a really smart person, but her friends tend to use it when someone is being stupid.

Right now, El is going for the second definition. And Hop definitely seems to understand exactly what she's saying. "You better lose some

of that attitude by the time we get to Joyce's house."

"You started it."

Silence, again, for the rest of the drive. Hop pulls up to the Byers' house and parks. El slips her seatbelt off and reaches for the door handle.

"You understand that I don't want to see you get hurt, right?" Hop asks. El sits back in her seat. "And I don't want to take you to a hospital any more than you want to go. A place like that is the last place I want you to be. But right now, it might be what's best. So I'm asking you to just think about it."

El opens the door and gets out of the truck, effectively ending the conversation.

Neither of them is able to disguise their irritable moods very well, and while Joyce's concerned glance bounces between El and Hop as everyone piles their plates high with pizza, she doesn't say anything about it. At least, she doesn't say anything about it in front of Eleven, who disappears into Will's room at the first opportunity.

They don't talk much because Will is recording songs off the radio for a 'mixtape', so she ends up lying at the foot of Will's bed and staring at the ceiling, while Will sits at the other end, propped up against his pillows, and sketches something in a notebook.

El does think about what Hop said.

Considering that theories are just theories, and considering that any fact-finding mission would mean agreeing to procedures she's not enthusiastic about enduring, Eleven chews over whether she actually needs an explanation for her sudden ability to start fires when she never needed one before — no one ever sat her down and clarified where her old powers came from, nor did she ever wonder until digging through Hopper's boxes gave her more information than she knows what to do with.

Carefully weighing her fear of hospitals and fear of being studied against the cold creep of uncertainty from never learning exactly

what changed, or how or when or why, El doesn't yet know which is enough to tip the scale.

What she does know is, deep down, she's a little bit afraid of what's happening to her.

Maybe she is sick. And maybe, *maybe*, looking for answers isn't a bad thing.

The song on the radio ends and Will leans over to stop the tape recorder.

"What are you drawing?" El asks now that she's allowed to speak again. Will turns the notebook around and shows her: it's a sketch of his room, as it looks right now from his present viewpoint, with the radio on his desk and a light breeze pushing the curtain around through the half-open window and Eleven forlornly sprawled across his bed.

She gives him a look. He smiles, and it's almost like an apology. "I couldn't help it. You look so distressed."

He doesn't ask why she's distressed. He just returns to his drawing, and El is left with the feeling that she can tell him if she wants to but Will's not going to push her to do so. It's kind of freeing and in a weird way makes it easier to talk about. "Hop wants me to do medical tests."

"Yeah, that makes sense. He and Mom took me to a bunch of those after the Upside Down."

El knows this. She recalls, whenever Joyce and Hop would take Will out of town, the nights Hop spent away from the cabin, leaving her with instructions for dinner and breakfast, rules about staying inside, and promises to return the next day. "I remember."

Will looks surprised and then, as he absorbs the information, less so. "Huh. Yeah, I guess you would."

"Did it help?"

Still absorbed in his notebook, Will doesn't answer for one whole

song. It's a song he doesn't turn on the tape recorder for, and El is left wondering what criteria is necessary for the music that Will wants to save.

"I don't know," he says when the song ends. "Sometimes I think it might have been worse if we hadn't. But it's also hard to imagine how it could have been worse." He looks up, briefly meeting her eyes, and then lets his gaze drop back to the sketch in front of him. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Well, if they try to do something you don't like, you can always burn the hospital down." El snorts. Will finishes whatever he was doing to his drawing and turns the notebook around again, so El can see. "There. Is that better?"

Most of the picture is the same, but above sketch-Eleven's head are several floating objects, with lines of trajectory showing them in motion.

She stares at it, a little wistful. She misses being able to do that.

"Better."

"Hey, you see what's playing tonight?"

Hop's leaning on the counter and reading the TV guide while El, from the couch, aims the remote at the TV and flips through the channels. She's on her way to their favorite movie channel but is willing to be swayed if she stumbles across something better.

Both are deliberately avoiding the topic of superpowers because neither feel like getting into an argument.

"What?" El asks without looking up from the TV.

Hop comes over and turns the TV guide toward her so she can read it. *2001: A Space Odyssey*. "You ever see that?" Hop asks. El shakes her head. "You'll like it. It's science fiction."

El stares at him, amused. Hop, who tends to prefer westerns or cop shows (or, *occasionally*, old black-and-white dramas), is not what El — or anyone — would call a fan of sci-fi. “You watch science fiction?”

He grins and settles in next to her on the couch. “This one, yeah. It, uh, actually it was Sara’s favorite movie. One of her favorites. We watched it a bunch of times.”

Eleven’s kind of startled at that. Not about Sara having favorite movies but about Hopper bringing her name up at all. She can count on one hand the number of times Hopper has mentioned Sara since the first time he mentioned Sara, in his truck on the way to the gate, almost a whole year after El had been living with him. “Sara’s favorite?”

“Mmhm. I don’t think she understood too much of the story. She was pretty young. But she liked the space stuff.”

When the movie starts, it’s very apparent very quickly why someone who loves space might have considered it a favorite. But as she leans against Hop’s side while he puts his arm around her, El finds herself thinking more about Sara than paying attention to the film.

El doesn’t know the entirety of what happened, only bits and pieces. She knows Sara was sick and didn’t get better. She knows Sara died in a hospital. She thinks about what Hopper said — *a place like that is the last place I want you to be* — and wonders if he ever said something like it to his other little girl.

She was probably scared, too.

Usually by the time the credits roll on an after-dinner movie, either El or Hop, or both, would be asleep. But they’re still awake tonight, each a little carried away on the emotions that the oddly personal movie has led them to.

“I’ll go,” El says.

Hop yawns. “Go where?”

“Owens’ tests. I’ll do it.”

She feels him shift and glances up to see him staring down at her, a mixture of surprise and something else in his eyes. *Relief*, she decides. Surprise and relief. “Really?”

Eleven nods.

When he speaks again, his voice is soft. “How come?”

Not quite knowing how to explain the minutiae of her thought process, El, after some careful consideration, attempts to boil her change of heart down to a single understandable concept. “I trust you.”

Hopper kisses the top of her head, and though it’s late, neither of them make a move to get up as the next movie starts. The flickering light of the TV blends with the nightly cacophony of nature that leaks through the thin walls of their little trailer, and before the first act ends, their eyes are closed. By the end of the second act, both are finally, completely, conked out.

“When do you leave?”

El is sitting on the floor, throwing a ‘stress ball’ against her bedroom wall, while Max lies on the bed above her and the radio plays music that Jonathan calls ‘culture’ and that Hop calls ‘hippie crap’.

Technically, she’s supposed to squeeze the stress ball, but throwing it against the wall works just as well.

“Tomorrow,” El says. “We stay in a hotel. Appointment on Monday.”

Max is especially quick these days to glom onto anything that could potentially serve as a distraction from her own grief and so keeps asking questions about El’s upcoming appointment with Dr. Owens, which is good because Eleven can’t stop ruminating on it.

This sleepover is probably going to be less fun than usual.

“So, you’ll be back in time for the first day of school.”

“Yes.”

“Bummer.” Max stops, catches what she said and how it sounds, and tries to backtrack. “Not – I don’t mean you going to school is a bummer. School just... kind of sucks.”

“I understand.”

But El doesn’t agree that missing school is the great adventure Max seems to think it is. Especially not to have x-rays done in Chicago.

(Will is the only one of her friends who really gets it, El thinks.

“Are you nervous?” he asks when she tells him about her appointment. El nods. “I was, too. Everyone was really nice, though.”

“People were nice in the lab,” she says. “Sometimes.”

People in the lab were gentle, even. There were times they spoke with kindness, and smiled, and made faces that made her laugh or held her hand when she was scared.

But they did those things while they tied her down, and locked her up, and starved her, and poked her with needles, and forced her to use her powers until she passed out.

Nice does not mean good.

Will seems to understand. “Well, my mom won’t let anything happen to you.”

Eleven hopes he’s right.)

Chicago is where Dr. Owens’ ‘discreet’ friends work, and as far as they know, Eleven is just another weird kid from Hawkins having weird problems related to all the weird stuff that has happened in the town since that other weird kid ‘died’ and ‘came back to life’.

Hop promised, if everything looks fine, the x-rays would be the only test. At first, El is prepared for a hard negotiation over exactly what the proposed testing will entail, but Hopper shocks her by saying he doesn’t want to do anything ‘invasive’ — like blood draws — unless ‘something else changes’ because he thinks somehow, no matter how discreet Owens’ friends are, the government will be led right to their

doorstep.

So we're just going to look, he tells her, and if we can't see anything bad, then we'll call it.

("Call it?")

"Figure of speech. Means we'll be done.")

Papa always made that promise, too, though. *Just once, Eleven*, he would say, and then when the test didn't show what he wanted it to show, one test became two, three, four, all day and all night. So she isn't sure if one test really means one test, but she trusts Hop more than she trusted Papa to keep promises.

And while the lab is the big reason why she isn't crazy about doctors and hospitals, this time, for once, memories of her experience there are going to help as much as hurt. Because of that place, El knows exactly what x-rays are, having gotten them a million times before, and so she knows exactly what to expect and, more importantly, exactly what not to expect. And if anything unexpected starts to happen...

Will's right. She could always burn the hospital down.

("Do *not* burn anything down. If we get there and you have a problem with anything or anyone, tell me or Joyce, and we'll take care of it. Understand?")

Hopper says there's medicine she can take that would help her stay calm and relaxed and not be afraid. She knows what he's talking about. It's the same medicine — called S-E-D-A-T-I-V-E — she used to get in the lab. Sometimes for x-rays, actually, whenever the Bad Men got tired of telling her to hold still.

Or when they were scared of her.

Eleven never cared for being sedated, which from what she can remember involves a lot of bright lights and a lot of people in white coats and a lot of machines and a lot of needles and a lot of leaving her alone afterward in her cold, dark, empty bedroom to sleep it off.

She tells Hop she wants to try first, without the medicine.

(“Whatever you want. Let me know if you change your mind.”)

The stress ball hits the wall for the hundredth time and bounces at a weird angle, landing on the other side of the room. Without thinking about it, El mentally calls it back to her.

Flames spurt out of the plastic foam-like material.

“Shit!” Eleven dives for the ball and slaps at the blaze, managing to snuff out the fire before alerting the brand-new smoke detector Hop installed in her room.

Max looks amused and kind of in awe and then changes the subject. “Let’s watch a movie.”

They kick Hop out of the living room and commandeer the television for the night. El tries to let herself be distracted by Max’s running commentary about whatever it is they’re watching, and it works for about a movie and a half. Then Max is yawning more than talking and Eleven can’t keep out the worry and doubt and the sense that by agreeing to hospital stuff she might be making a big mistake.

Max goes home in the morning, and Joyce arrives in the afternoon. She’s coming with them to Chicago for what Hop calls ‘moral support’, just like how Hop always went with Joyce and Will for Will’s appointments. Plus, Hop’s not supposed to take his police truck on personal errands, and it would never make it to Chicago, anyway. It probably wouldn’t make it to the county line.

So, Joyce lets them use her car.

Hop drives while Joyce sits on the front passenger seat, which means Eleven has to sit in the backseat, and the only problem with this scenario is that El can’t reach the radio, physically or mentally, so she sits as close as she can in the gap between the two front seats, stretching her seatbelt forward, and tries to issue directives on which station to listen to.

Hop gets annoyed pretty quickly with this arrangement. “We’re not spending the whole trip taking requests, kid.”

The trip is boring after that, and El passes the time by staring out the window and listening to whatever Hop wants to listen to. It's a long drive between Hawkins and Chicago with not a lot in between, and though periodically Joyce and Hop loop El into their conversation, mostly they talk to each other.

The landscape gets more interesting when the cornfields are replaced by buildings, taller and taller until the Chicago skyline is filling up the view. She would be able to enjoy it more, she thinks, were she here for almost any reason other than the one that's brought her.

At the hotel, their room is just two beds, a TV, dresser, table, and bathroom. It reminds El of the cabin more than anything else, but smaller and less dusty. El casually tosses her bag on the first bed, her thoughts focused on the TV.

"Nah uh," Hop says, moving her bag to the bed farther from the door. El just shrugs and turns on the television. Hop turns it off. "Nope, c'mon. We gotta go find something to eat."

They get burgers for dinner.

It's El's first time in a restaurant (except for Benny's diner, which was different in so many ways). Hop says it's not a real restaurant because it's 'fast food' but Eleven's pretty sure it counts because someone takes their order and music is playing and they eat their food at a table in a big dining room, just like in restaurants on TV.

This is the kind of place Hop goes to when he brings home food instead of cooking it, El realizes.

Instead of sitting normally, she hikes herself up on her chair and eats her burger with one hand, sauce dripping down her chin, while she watches the other people in the restaurant. Most people come in, get food, and leave. Another family sits nearby, though, with two kids much younger than Eleven who make a lot of noise and drop food on the floor.

It's *fascinating*.

Hop and Joyce are sitting across from her and laughing quietly at

something — giving Eleven the distinct impression that she's yet again missing a joke that anyone else would understand — while El angles herself so she can more clearly see an old man sitting down at the table behind them.

“Hey.” Hop reaches over and taps her side of the table. “You don’t like people staring at you, right?”

El hunches over her own food, continuing to furtively glance at other patrons out of the corner of her eye. Joyce, at least, can tell what she’s doing but doesn’t reprimand her. “Having fun?”

“Can we do this every day?” Eleven asks around a bite of burger.

Hop flashes the same amused smile that he and Joyce have been wearing throughout dinner, and El wonders what it is they’ve found funny. “Maybe once a week.”

Back at the hotel, Hop and Joyce sit El down and go over, again, exactly what is going to happen the next day. The plan is to ‘check out’ of the hotel before going to the hospital, so once the appointment is over, they can go straight home. The other plan, for during the appointment, is to ‘get in and get out’, as fast as possible, which means El has to ‘cooperate’ with the doctors.

“If you try to stall, it’s just gonna waste everyone’s time and this whole thing’ll last way longer than it needs to,” Hop says. More gently, he adds, “If somebody does something you don’t like, just tell them to stop, and they’ll stop, okay?”

It’s something he’s said over and over since she agreed to go to Chicago. Almost like he knows, though she’s never told him, that in the lab, any kind of protest was ignored. Even now, she has doubts that simply saying ‘stop’ will actually work. “What if they don’t?”

“Then I’ll *make* them stop.”

Eleven smiles at that. Joyce smiles at that, too, and looks at Hop with an expression that El has only ever seen from Mike and only when looking at El. Turning away from Hop, Joyce takes El’s hands in hers.

“Do you remember,” she asks, “what I told you when we were in the

school and you were getting ready to use the bath to find Will?"

El does, though it seems like a lifetime ago. "You said tell you if I get scared."

"And that I'd be there the whole time, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, the same thing applies for tomorrow. Okay?"

"Okay."

They watch TV for a while, Hop and Joyce lying in one bed and Eleven lying in the other. El can't see clearly enough to tell, but she's pretty sure they're holding hands. Hop notices her glancing over.

"What is it?" he asks.

"*Three inches*," Eleven whispers, and both the smile and the eyeroll she gets in response are sardonic as Hop turns out the light between them.

Early the next morning, she has her appointment.

Eleven spends the not-long-enough drive from the hotel to the hospital with her forehead pressed against the back of the seat in front of her (if Joyce can feel it, she doesn't say anything) quietly listing all the ways this won't be like the lab: 1. Hop is here. 2. Joyce is here. 3. Papa is *not* here. Etc.

The hospital is big. Bigger than the lab. Imposing. Formidable. As they pass through the automatic doors, El thinks about their chances of never coming out again.

She sits between Hop and Joyce in the 'waiting room' and bounces her leg in anxious energy, the linoleum squeaking beneath her shoe. Hopper fidgets, eyeing the other waiting people, who are eyeing them in turn. Joyce rests a hand on El's knee, stilling its motion, and lightly shushes her. Eleven takes a deep breath.

All three of them are on edge.

Finally, a door opens and a lady calls Eleven's name — *Jane Hopper* — and they follow the lady to a smaller room, where she takes El's blood pressure (familiar), height and weight (familiar), and asks questions about her 'medical history' (unfamiliar) that Hop answers.

Owens comes in to talk to them before the procedure ("Good morning, good morning, good morning," he says; Hop and Eleven roll their eyes almost simultaneously), and he brings a long white shirt like the kind El always had to wear in the lab. As soon as she sees it, her chest gets tight and her breathing gets shallow and the shirt catches fire, prompting Owens to drop it to avoid getting burned, and he and Hop stomp on it until the flames go out.

After that, El decides to take the sedative.

("You'll feel a little pinch," the doctor (not Owens) says. El wants to say she knows what needles feel like, but she keeps quiet while the medicine goes in and waits for the effects to hit.

It doesn't take long.

She blinks, sluggish and heavy, and that familiar sensation of being put into slow motion while everyone else stays at regular speed washes over her. The hospital barely registers as a threat anymore, and Eleven can't remember why she was so afraid or why coming here was such a big deal. Part of her would like to reassure Hopper, who doesn't look nearly as unbothered as she feels, that he can *relax* and *take it easy* because *everything's fine*.

Hell, the gate to the Upside Down could open beneath her feet and it wouldn't disturb her sense of tranquility.

"Feel all right?" someone asks from far away.

"Uh huh," El says.

If it ever gets too scary, in that place, you just let me know, Joyce told her, but it doesn't matter now. Nothing's scary and nothing hurts and everything's...)

And after that, she doesn't remember much.

The x-ray machine is loud, and she's wearing one of those stupid white gowns, but the whole thing feels like it's over as soon as it starts. There are flashes of moments that her brain holds onto — Hop asking "how ya feel?", Joyce helping her fumble through the act of getting dressed, holding onto someone (Hop? Joyce?) while hobbling out to the car, and then somehow sitting in the backseat with her seatbelt on as Hop drives them out of the parking lot.

El stares out the window, half-listening to Hop and Joyce debate the best way to get out of Chicago. The city looks big and small at the same time, and Eleven draws her finger along the glass, tracing the outline of the buildings. *Skyscrapers*. Word-of-the-day.

"The freeway's gonna be packed, Joyce."

"Yeah, coming in. Not going out."

"City this big, it's always packed."

El slumps against the door, using her arm as a pillow, and accidentally makes the radio spark when she tries to mentally turn it on after once again forgetting — even though it's the entire reason for this trip — that her powers are different now. Up front, Hop and Joyce jump at the sudden, short-lived light show.

"Sorry," El mumbles.

Joyce reaches back with one hand and, in a kind of comfort, pats Eleven's knee. Unlike in Hop's truck, the mishap leaves the car radio mostly undamaged, so Hop punches the power button and sets it to a channel El likes, turning the volume up loud enough that she can hear it.

She thinks she says thank you.

"Just relax, kid. We'll be home soon."

El doesn't make it through the first song before falling asleep, and the rest of the car ride passes in fragments as she drifts in and out — a loud honk from a semi-truck, Hop and Joyce bickering again about directions, Hop asking, "is she still asleep?", random snippets of music, laughter, and a million miles of farmland — until she finally

wakes up, still tired but more lucid, and the car is stopped at a gas station. Hop's outside, watching the numbers change on the gas pump. Joyce is... El doesn't know where Joyce is.

Hop sees through the window that El's awake and opens one of the driver-side doors. "Hey. How're you feeling?"

"Tired."

"Yeah, I bet."

"Where are we?"

"Hawkins. Almost home."

The front passenger door opens suddenly and Joyce gets into the car with a bag from the gas station. She pulls out a candy bar for Hop and upon seeing that Eleven's awake, passes a little bag of chips to the backseat. "Those are the kind you like, right?"

They are, and El realizes she hasn't eaten anything all day. "Thank you."

Leaving the gas station with a full tank, it's only a few minutes' drive to the Hoppers' trailer. El munches on chips and stares out the window, really, really looking forward to being home. When Hop turns into their gravel lot and pulls up next to their house, Eleven almost trips over herself in her haste to exit the car — a mixture of excitement, relief, and whatever drugs have yet to be excised from her system.

She scrambles up the steps and it isn't until she reaches the front door that she realizes she has no way to open it anymore — it's locked, on the inside, and Hop has the key. Eleven leans against the door and waits for Hopper, who seems to be taking his sweet time saying goodbye to Joyce.

What little patience El has to begin with rapidly disappears. "Hopper."

Joyce leaves, finally, tires spinning on the gravel, and Hop comes up behind Eleven to unlock the door. "We should probably get you a

key, huh?”

Inside, she lumbers into the living room and flops onto the couch like it's a bed. The sun is shining through the windows, Hop is moving around in the kitchen, and Eleven spies the TV remote on top of the TV on the other side of the room. The toaster pops, and El pushes her face into the tiny throw pillow.

A plate of Eggos appears on the coffee table, and El looks up as Hop sits on the edge of the couch. Along with the food, he's also brought the TV remote, and he's holding it in a way that means he's giving it to her. She takes it and he leans down to kiss her hairline. “Good job today. I'm proud of you.”

“Thanks.”

He moves off the couch as Eleven aims the remote at the TV and nibbles at one of the waffles. Eyelids heavy, the remote loose in her grasp, she soon abandons the food and abandons the task of channel-surfing. Blinking slowly as a commercial for soap plays on the screen, Eleven closes her eyes for several seconds too long to easily open them again. She hears approaching footsteps, feels the remote leave her hand and the sudden weight of a light blanket, and wants to protest as the sound from the TV changes to one of Hop's shows, but she's already asleep.

A few days later, Owens meets them in a parking lot in Hawkins to go over the results.

“Totally clean,” he says while Hop holds the x-rays up to the sun, checking for any problems. “Wouldn't even know there was anything special about you at all, kiddo.”

El ignores him and watches Hop pass the x-rays to Joyce, who does her own checks before passing them to Eleven. El blinks and stares at the images. All the x-rays taken in the lab must have looked similar, but no one ever bothered to show her any of the resulting pictures, and she marvels for a second at seeing her own skeleton until it gets too weird and she passes the films back to Hop, who checks them again.

She holds her breath and waits, wondering if the test was good enough or if she'll have to go back and do more, or go to a different hospital with different doctors, or not go to school, or go back into hiding, or some other equally terrible option she hasn't thought of yet.

Hop stuffs the x-rays back into the folder. "Well. I guess that's that."

Eleven exhales, and a weight she hadn't realized she was carrying around finally dissipates.

("Oh, by the way," Owens says, "the old lab building is coming down. Higher-ups just approved an order for demolition.")

"Really?" Hop asks. Then, to El, "You hear that?"

Eleven does hear that. The news prompts a tangled mess of emotions to well up inside her: Surprise. Suspicion. Fear. Always fear.

But there's no elation. No satisfaction. No happiness.

And El isn't sure why.)

3. Chapter 3

School is overwhelming.

The first day of classes ends up not unlike Eleven's first day out of the lab, in the sense that she's in a completely new environment where everybody else not only already knows the rules but also comes armed with a foundation of education, experience, and social fluency to lean on when stuff gets hard or confusing.

Hop and her friends did the best they could to cram several years of knowledge into several months, but none of them are teachers, and Eleven was starting from zero. And the thing about school is it's not just classes and learning but also a bunch of stupid little things like locker combinations and hall passes and whatever 'spirit day' is, and these are all things that her peers are familiar with to the point of not even having to think about it. If she wants to blend in then she has to know these things, too, and whenever she doesn't, she feels the knowledge gap between her and the other students, including her friends, widen even further.

She wakes up early that first day. Or, to be more accurate, never really settles into sleep, her mind whirling with nervous energy as she imagines an endless array of scenarios in anticipation of that first bell, that first roll call, that first homework assignment.

Not first of the year, like all the other students, her friends included.

First, *ever*.

Eleven knows where her locker is and knows where all her classes are because during the summer, the school had 'orientation' for students going into high school to get their schedules and figure out their way around the building so they don't get lost on the first day.

(The school, El thinks, is way easier to navigate than the lab. At the same time, the rules here are so foreign that she thinks, in a weird, disconcerting way, the lab would almost be a more comfortable place to be.)

But orientation didn't do much in the way of showing what happens in the classroom. One of those things that everyone already knows, El snarks to herself, so why bother explaining it.

In the cabin, when her friends were in school and she was in hiding, sometimes El would find their classes in the void and project their lessons through the radio, like she once played Will's voice through Mike's supercomm. If she was feeling especially ambitious, she would try to follow along with the lecture in the mishmash of textbooks Hop found at library sales and secondhand stores.

That kind of thing wore her out quickly, though. And it was only a pale imitation of the classroom setting anyway.

She thinks about the movies she's seen about kids in school, like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* or *Grease* or *Carrie*, which Hop says she should 'absolutely not' use as a guide to high school because those kinds of movies are all made up for 'drama'.

The only way to know what school is really like seems to be just going and experiencing it.

"You ready for this?" Hop asks. His police truck is parked in front of Hawkins High School and El's sitting in the passenger seat, watching all the other kids going inside.

El is not ready for this. But if she says that, then Hop might take her home and she'll never get to go to school. "Yes."

He seems to know she's lying. "Hey." El turns. "You can do this. Okay?"

"Okay." The word wobbles as it exits her mouth.

"First day's always the hardest. You'll be fine."

Hopper's right. For the most part, she is fine. The lights in the school aren't as harsh as the lab, and there are windows in every classroom, and nobody hurts her or threatens her, and she's got classes with her friends, and she's not even the only new student this year.

School isn't just that first day, though.

School is also every day after.

Math isn't terrible. Most of the time, it lacks much of the context that's needed to understand subjects like English and history and winds up pretty much beginning and ending with the problems on the page. Eleven can do the problems on the page. Not as good as her friends, but mostly good enough, at least, when she has enough time to do the work.

Science is similar to math and probably wouldn't be terrible, either, if she had any other teacher.

The science teacher, Ms. Ratliff, who Mike says was already old when his mom was a student, somehow missed the news about the police chief's daughter coming to town until the end of that first week of classes, when she apparently finally decided to bother to start learning students' names.

"Jane Hopper," she announces at the beginning of class one day, pausing for a long moment while her eyes survey the sea of desks before locking on Eleven. "Are you related to Jim Hopper?"

Feeling the stares from the rest of the class, El manages to resist the urge to slouch low in her chair. "He's my dad."

At that, Ms. Ratliff's sour expression somehow becomes even more sour, and she sneers through the rest of class with a glare that never lingers far from Eleven.

When the bell rings and everyone starts to leave, El tries to duck out with the rest of them but the teacher stops her before she can reach the door.

"Jane Hopper!" Ms. Ratliff points one gnarled, crooked finger at El and curls it inward, gesturing for Eleven to come to her desk. Mike gives El a helpless look as he walks out, and very soon, El and Ms. Ratliff are the only ones left in the classroom. The teacher regards El with a steely reserve that would fit in well at the former Hawkins lab. "When your dad was a student here, he was a *hooligan*. Are you a *hooligan*?"

Eleven has never wished harder that she knew the definition of a word. She's guessing 'hooligan' doesn't mean anything good, but it doesn't sound like any word she's ever heard of. With no other options, she starts to ask as delicately as possible, "What is hooli—,"

The teacher cuts her off. "Troublemaker! Are you a *troublemaker*?"

El thinks about all the trouble she's made in the past couple of years, including but not limited to shoplifting, assault, hitchhiking, breaking and entering, stealing, lying, destruction of property, and tearing a hole in the fabric of space and time.

She shakes her head.

Ms. Ratliff glares at her suspiciously. "I've got my eye on you."

El scurries out of the classroom while she still has the chance. Mike is waiting just outside the door. "Are you okay? What did she want?"

"She asked if I'm 'hooligan'."

Mike makes a face. "What? Why?"

El shrugs. "I don't know."

(Later, she asks Hopper, "What did you do to Ms. Ratliff?"

"Nothing!" he sputters. "And if she tells you any different, she's a liar!")

History is...

"Okay, El, measure out how long these rivers need to be, and I will draw some huts in the valley."

...a lot.

Dustin passes the ruler to Eleven and hunches over his own corner of the big sheet of parchment paper that, when they're finished, will be a scale drawing of 'Mesopotamia' during the 'Bronze Age', where some of the earliest civilizations in human history began. El isn't sure

if this is before or after the dinosaurs died out, but all she has to do is draw some rivers, so that's all she decides to worry about right now.

There's a lot of history to learn. People did so much stuff a long time ago.

After the huts and the rivers are done, Dustin starts drawing people. Tiny stick figures with spears and plows. "How do you feel about adding some animals?" he asks.

"Dinosaurs?"

"That'd be cool. But unfortunately there weren't any dinosaurs in Mesopotamia. At least, not after people started living there. Maybe some camels?" Eleven doesn't know what camels are. Dustin seems to understand her hesitation. "Or some lions?"

She knows what lions are. She had a stuffed lion in the lab.

Sometimes in the lab she would imagine her stuffed lion was alive and big enough to protect her from the bad people, though never did she think that there were real lions in the real world on the other side of the lab walls. Hop says someday he'll take her to a 'zoo' so she can see them up close.

Glancing at Dustin's stick people, El thinks maybe some of the kids in their Mesopotamia village might need protecting, too.

"Big lions," she says.

"Hell yeah."

English class is a total crash and burn, right out of the gate. There's no other real way to put it.

El can read, slowly and with a dictionary in easy reach, and she likes reading okay but has never really engaged very well with literature. Often, stories require supplementary information that she doesn't have, and the authors don't always bother to explain things that are supposed to be 'common knowledge'.

She does know grammar, mostly. But her English teacher doesn't talk about grammar really at all and instead asks questions about the 'themes' or the 'symbolism' in the novel the class is reading, which is a very bad book about a group of mouthbreathers who get trapped on an island.

What are the narrative elements? Who is the antagonist? Why did this character make that decision?

Eleven has a hard enough time figuring out why real people in the real world do the things they do, let alone trying to pinpoint motivations for fictional book people. And a lot of the time she has to use the dictionary to look up multiple words per page, sometimes per paragraph, so her slow reading is even slower than normal, and at the pace that her teacher expects — at least one chapter per night, typically — El doesn't always have time to understand everything and usually ends up going to class even more confused than the day before.

What makes her feel better, though, is that she has English with Mike and Lucas, and they don't seem to be great at it either.

"So, the conch symbolizes power," Mike says, flipping through the book. "Right?"

"I don't know, man," Lucas says, leaning back in his chair. "What even is a conch?"

The whole class is split into groups and attempting to answer questions about the latest chapter, with El and Mike and Lucas tucked away in the corner of the classroom, far from both the teacher's desk and the next-closest cluster of students.

"It's like a shell." Mike turns his worksheet over and doodles a messy sketch of the conch-shell. "Like this."

"That looks like a blob."

"It's a *shell*. You blow in this end here, and it makes a sound like a bullhorn."

"So, the blob symbolizes power." Lucas hunches over his own

worksheet and scribbles an answer to one of the questions.

Mike frowns and pushes his paper toward El. “You think it looks like a shell, right El?”

Eleven honestly can’t say because she also doesn’t know what a conch is or what kind of shell Mike is talking about. More and more the dictionary is failing her, as she keeps having to also look up the words that are used to define the words she doesn’t know. More and more, with so many terms to learn, El has to move on with only partial definitions, her imagination full of empty spaces where pictures of nouns and verbs should be. “Like eggshell?”

“No, like *seashell*.” Mike thinks for a second about how to explain, and what he comes up with is, “It’s a thing that you find at the beach. I don’t really know where it comes from or what it’s made of...”

Lucas shrugs.

El thinks back to all the beaches she’s seen on TV and the beach from Billy’s memory, but she doesn’t remember any kind of ‘thing that you find’ beyond the sand and the ocean and the birds.

“Here, look.” On the back of his worksheet, next to the conch-blob, Mike draws a series of squiggly circles that don’t look much like anything to Eleven.

Lucas makes a face at Mike’s drawings. “You’re gonna confuse her more. El, just picture an actual bullhorn. You know, like a trumpet.”

That would work. Except...

“‘Trumpet’?”

Lucas mimes something with his hands that El cannot comprehend, and Mike again turns to his sheet of doodles. Leaning over his desk, Lucas checks what Mike is trying to draw this time and rolls his eyes. “That’s a trombone.”

Gym class is not much better than English.

On the plus side, El's really, really, really glad she's friends with Max now because gym would be terrible without her. It's still terrible with her, but Max's presence at least prevents Eleven from making a giant fool of herself on a daily basis.

El's never heard of *any* of the games they play in gym.

Well, except for baseball because Hop's always watching baseball games on TV. She couldn't say what the rules are, though, which everyone else seems to know. Everyone knows the rules to *all* the games, so the teacher barely ever explains anything. Kickball, basketball, jump rope, pushups, sit ups, run laps, etc.

She's fumbling her way through a game called 'soccer' when one of the girls calls El a word that El's never heard before but that makes Max decide to punch the girl in the face and all three of them get sent to the principal's office.

(When the principal asks Max if she's sorry, Max says, "Sorry that I didn't break her nose," and gets suspended.)

Hop also gets called to the school and he sits next to Eleven on a bench outside the principal's door while Max's mom and stepdad are inside taking turns yelling at the other girl's parents, who sound like they are giving it right back to them.

"I heard what happened," Hop says. "Are you okay?"

El still doesn't know the meaning of the word she got called and she's not the one who got punched, so she says, "Yes."

"Are you doing okay with school? In general? Like..." He gestures to the air. "...the whole... all of it?"

He's asked this before, and El knows sometimes the teachers call their house at night and Hop talks to them but never really says what they talk about. El figures if it's important, he'll tell her.

She nods, and Hop gives her shoulder a squeeze before going into the office and adding to the yelling.

The gym incident aside, most of the other students leave her alone. Troy, the boy whose arm she broke by the quarry, moved away last year, according to her friends. Eleven recognizes the girl from the mall, who laughed at El and Max, and whose drink cup El exploded all over her and her friends. But she doesn't talk to the party, except to laugh like she did at the mall, and El can't explode anything anymore and she's not allowed to use her powers at school, anyway.

Nancy and Jonathan are also in high school, but they're in different classes and El never sees either of them, usually.

And that's it. That's the whole list of students that El knows, besides her friends.

On her first day, she's approached by a few kids outside the party, mostly boys but some girls, and El doesn't exactly know what to do with the attention. A few heard about the rumors regarding how and why she's living with Hopper and want to ask her questions about it — she tells them to mind their own business.

Others get a little too personal.

"What's one-hundred ten?" a boy asks as he grabs her arm and reads her lab tattoo wrong. El yanks her arm back.

"The number of people she's killed," Dustin says as he comes up behind her, followed by the rest of the party. "So maybe you should leave her alone."

The boy laughs. "What's it really mean?"

"No, for real," Lucas says. "It's a prison tattoo. Right, El?"

El doesn't say anything. Just stares. The boy swallows hard and walks away.

("So, your principal called," Hop tells her a few days later. "Are you telling people that you got your tattoo in prison?"

"Yes."

"Right, okay. Just checking.")

After that, the other students label her a 'weirdo' and leave her alone. Mike tells her it's a 'badge of honor'. So, surprisingly, does Will.

"I mean, would you rather be friends with David Bowie or Kenny Rogers?" Will asks.

He must be talking about other students she hasn't met, El thinks, because she's never heard of those people.

As it happens, one of the things that fascinates her the most about school is the concept of a hall pass. Hall passes are little cards students carry when they want to leave the classroom so all the teachers know they're allowed to be in the hallway. Students can get hall passes for *anything*. They can say *oh I need to go to my locker to get my homework*, or *I need to go to the bathroom*, or *I forgot my book in the other classroom*.

Nobody checks if any of that is true, and teachers just let students go without following them to make sure what they're doing is what they said they're doing.

The only time El was ever left alone in the lab was in her bedroom, and even that room had a camera mounted in the corner so none of her actions — even *sleeping* — went unmonitored.

She finds it astounding that students are allowed to freely roam the school almost unchecked, and she wonders why more of them don't just leave. It's not like any of the doors are locked — another startling realization — and a lot of her classmates seem bored on the best of days and miserable on the worst.

But Eleven figures that whatever hang-ups the other kids have about escaping lectures under the cover of a hall pass (*Maybe they're stupid? But her friends aren't stupid and they also stay put...*) aren't her problem, and she stretches the privilege to its limits, using it to explore the school: opening doors to rooms she's never seen, looking out windows, and wandering the halls.

Teachers are pretty quick to say 'what are you doing here?' if she wanders into any other classroom, but the school librarian never asks

her any questions and the library windows have the best view, so sometimes she'll spend a good 10 minutes sitting at one of the tables there before heading back to her actual class.

That's where she is one morning when the fire alarm goes off.

Sometimes alarms went off in the lab, but they usually meant something like, 'someone opened a door they're not supposed to open' or 'someone opened a portal to another dimension and now a monster is eating everyone'. Stuff like that.

Eleven doesn't ever remember any fire alarms. She's not even sure what to do when one goes off, but everyone else gets up and goes outside, so El does, too.

It's a strange experience. Everyone, all the students and teachers just standing outside and looking at the school. El pictures all the bad people from the lab having to stand outside for a 'fire alarm' and laughs out loud at the absurdity.

There's no fire, so they get to go back inside after a few minutes. El heads back to her classroom instead of the library and on the way sees firefighters standing near the office, talking to the principal, along with Hopper.

Eleven isn't sure why her dad's here — he's a policeman, not a fireman — until he finally finds her in the crowd and makes eye contact, his expression rigid with seriousness and posing an unsaid question aimed directly at her.

She's not great at reading people. But she knows him really, really well, and she knows exactly what he's asking: *did you do this?*

El shrugs. If she did, she didn't mean to. And doesn't know how she did. And wouldn't be sure how to not do it again.

(If she had her old powers still, she thinks, it wouldn't have even been a question.)

"When you said you needed my help, I thought you meant like with math or something," Will grumbles as he steps carefully through the

woods, trying not to spill any water out of the buckets he's carrying. Eleven, weighed down with a similar load, though instead of buckets she's got a pair of jugs filled to their lips with water from the lake behind her house.

H₂O, as Ms. Ratliff would call it. And just like science class, Eleven and Will are about to conduct an experiment. It's going to be an experiment that very much resembles her first experiment in the trailer, when she burned up a whole bunch of things in the sink.

Good scientists don't just do one experiment and admit defeat, she has learned (and knows from experience), so she's going to try again and try harder. Experiments, she's decided, are OK when she's the one doing them.

I'm the scientist now, she thinks.

Eleven sets the jugs down near a big, flat tree stump. This seems like as good a spot as any. "I do need help with math. We do that after. We do this now."

Setting his own items down with a relieved sigh, Will looks around. "Here? What if someone sees you? Or films you?"

"Who films?"

"I don't know. Jonathan likes to take pictures around here."

El rolls her eyes. "Jonathan already knows."

"Okay but maybe other people like to take pictures, too," Will points out. El ignores him. She's lived in these woods and the only other person she ever saw, besides Hopper, was the man whose hat and coat she stole. But Will doesn't let her get out of hearing about his concerns. "I just think we should be careful."

"We are careful," El says as she piles the tree stump high with rocks and branches and leaves — anything she can use to practice superpowers on. "No one's here."

Will sighs. "Fine, but if you start a forest fire, I'm not taking any blame." Wondering how Will could possibly take blame for her

superpowers, El sits down on one side of the stump. Will sits on the other. “Okay, what happens now?” he asks.

“Shh.”

Here’s the problem with redoing an experiment pretty much exactly the same as the first time: you get exactly the same result. Two hours later, Eleven’s left with a pile of scorched rocks and the charred remains of branches, leaves, twigs, grass, and an old rubber band that Will had in his pocket.

The area is soaked, too — they’re out of water — and El thinks Will’s more than ready to call it quits. She can’t blame him.

“Maybe it *was* the Mind Flayer,” he says, yawning and leaning on the stump. El glares at him. “Sorry. Just a bad joke.” He scoots over to sit next to her. “So, why is this so important to you? You always kind of seemed like a ‘just roll with it’ type of person. You know, most of the time.”

Yeah, Eleven thinks. *Most of the time.*

Max peers at the mixture they’ve concocted and makes a face. “I don’t think we’re doing this right.”

Science class is split into partners, and the students are supposed to be ‘extracting DNA’ the way that Ms. Ratliff showed them and then answering the questions that she has written out on the board in a loopy handwriting that El can’t read. El doesn’t really know what ‘DNA’ is either, only that everybody has one.

She also doesn’t see what the problem is. Their own attempt at the experiment doesn’t really resemble the teacher’s, but she and Max haven’t missed any steps so far, she’s pretty sure. “We do it like Ms. Ratliff does it.”

“Yeah, but it’s not doing what it did when she did it.”

Eleven leans over to try and spy on Will’s worksheet. Will always has neat handwriting, and maybe she can figure out what questions she’s supposed to be answering.

“Hey!” Ms. Ratliff barks from across the room, staring straight at El. “Eyes on your own work.”

Sitting back in her seat, El tries to come up with a new strategy to finish this assignment. Max is being no help, and El should have known better than to attempt looking off someone else’s paper in science class, where Ms. Ratliff is constantly watching her.

But as she taps her pencil against her blank sheet of paper, a new thought occurs to her. “Max, do scientists always do notes?”

“I don’t know,” Max says, still distracted by their less-than-perfect experiment. “I guess so.”

El remembers the white coats and the clipboards from the lab, and she remembers never giving either much thought before, having been more concerned about the scary and the painful and the how to escape. But she gives thought to both now and realizes that maybe, if the Bad People considered themselves scientists and wrote down everything about her powers and abilities, the answer to why her powers have suddenly changed is still somewhere in the lab, written down on pieces of paper attached to clipboards or in the yellow file folders.

Maybe all they have to do is go back to the lab and this entire mystery will be solved. It seems so obvious now, she can’t believe no one mentioned it before.

Max is still staring at their concoction. “I don’t think we did this right.”

Eleven does her first history test and gets... a bad grade. Her first English paper has a similar grade. So does her first science test. And her first math test, which is supposed to be her best class. The math test ends up, like the others, as a crumpled ball at the bottom of her locker, and she slams her locker shut with way more force than necessary.

Mike is standing behind her. “Are you okay?”

They're still supposed to be broken up, but the fight outside the mall was a long time ago and El feels like she needs a distraction, so she responds with a question of her own. "You can come to my house? Tonight?"

The excitement on Mike's face morphs almost instantly into dejection.

"I can't tonight. I have to go visit my Nana," he tells her, and Eleven feels like she's been dunked in a bucket of cold water. Mike sees the look on her face, the *are you serious right now?* look, seems to immediately realize his mistake, and tries to explain. "No, it's not — it's for real this time. My mom freaked out when she heard me saying that Nana is sick and now she makes us visit like every other weekend." His explanation does little to placate Eleven's irritation, and he shifts tracks to try to salvage the conversation. "Tomorrow! I can hang out tomorrow. We can do whatever you want."

It's too late. The moment has soured.

"Max probably comes over tomorrow." El and Max don't actually have any plans, but El's pretty sure if she asks, Max will say yes.

"Well, if she doesn't, we can..." Mike says, making one more half-hearted attempt, like he knows his chance is slipping away. "If — if you want to."

"Mike..." El sighs, not knowing how to finish her thought, and then just shakes her head and walks away.

She doesn't know why she's letting one stupid lie ruin her relationship, but she also doesn't understand why Mike had to lie in the first place. He could have just told her that Hopper said they had to stop seeing each other so much.

It's not like she wouldn't have believed him.

Sometimes she gets home after school and there's a message on the (brand new) phone answer machine from Hop telling her that he won't be home until after dinner because he has plans with Joyce —

again — which means that Eleven has to fend for herself.

Sometimes she passes those nights in front of the TV with candy and Eggos. It reminds her a lot of late nights alone in the cabin, but now that her days are spent with other people, solitary evenings have become much easier to bear. (She wishes she could say the same for other aspects of her new life.)

Occasionally, she goes to Will's house because 'plans with Joyce' means Joyce isn't home, either, and with Jonathan working, Will's often just as alone as Eleven is.

("So, our parents..." Will starts at one point.

"Irresponsible lovesick teenagers," El says because she doesn't want to talk about it and that's something she once heard Hop say about her and Mike.

Will laughs and tells her to never say 'lovesick' again.)

Rarely, Eleven gets home after seeing a movie with her friends or spending hours at the arcade and finds Hop there with Joyce, watching their own movie in the living room or smoking and talking on the back porch, overlooking the lake.

Tonight, they're on the couch.

"Hey," Hop says when El walks in. "How was your day?"

"Hi," El says shortly, ignoring his question and Joyce's presence altogether as she vacates their space and shuts herself in her bedroom. Soon, there's a knock on the door and El has to get up to open it, which frustrates her more than it should.

"Hey, you OK?" Hop asks, leaning on the doorframe.

El nods. "Yes."

Instead of leaving, Hop steps further into her room and closes the door behind him. "Okay, 'cause it kind of seems like you're upset about something."

Lacking the capacity to effectively explain all that's on her mind, Eleven picks one bothersome thing at random to share. "I dumped Mike."

Whatever Hop might have been expecting her to say, that apparently isn't it. "You... what?"

"I dumped Mike. At the mall. Did Joyce leave?"

"At... you mean over the summer?"

"Yes. Did Joyce leave?"

"No. Do you want her to?" Eleven doesn't answer. Hop sits on the edge of the bed. "Why'd you dump Mike?" His eyes narrow. "Did he do something?"

"He lies about Nana."

Hop's faces changes. Softens. And he rubs the back of his neck like he does when he's uncomfortable. "Oh, that, um... That wasn't really —,"

"I know it's your fault," she tells him. He stares at her. "He still lies."

Hopper sits speechless for a moment and then asks, "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Okay, um. Okay." He gets up and opens the door, pausing with his hand on the doorknob like he wants to say or do something more. "Let me know if you want to talk."

He leaves the door ajar, and as the evening grows late, Eleven hears peals of laughter coming from the living room. She has to get up — *again* — to close the door and wonders until she feels sick what her own mother's laugh sounds like and whether anyone will ever hear it again.

Everything is weird now.

Things with Mike are weird, things with Hop and Joyce are weird, school is weird, her powers are weird, the whole world is weird. Eleven finds herself longing for the days in the cabin, between closing the gate and the Mind Flayer returning, when she could see her friends and learn but didn't yet have to go to school. When she could be out in the world on her terms and keep to the safe and familiar corners, like Mike's basement, and the woods behind Will's house, and sleepovers with Max.

She even misses the days she never thought she would miss — back in the cabin, before she closed the gate, when it was just her and Hop. It was lonely, sure, but it was slow, too. She just feels lost now. The world is so much faster, faster even than the lab, and El feels like she's moving at half-speed. Unable to keep up.

Not in sync with everyone else.

So one night, after midnight, when Hopper's sleeping on the couch, his snores overlapping with the sound of the TV he dozed off watching, Eleven sneaks into the kitchen and grabs the salt from the back of the cupboard and the half-full carton of eggs from the fridge.

There's no real reason for her to sneak around. She doesn't think Hopper would be mad at her. He would worry about her, though, and he worries about too much already.

If possible, she would like to avoid any complicated conversations about exactly what she's doing and why.

Just another experiment, she tells herself. One with a few more variables.

Eleven takes the items to the bathroom, where she's already got water filling up the bathtub. Without recalling exactly how to construct a sensory deprivation tank, she does the best she can — she knows the salt goes into the water, the correct temperature she's basing on feel because she doesn't have a thermometer, and she has no idea what the eggs are for so she sets the carton next to the sink in case she magically remembers.

And she's got a blindfold. To keep things nice and dark.

People don't like being spied on. But there's one person, in the whole wide world, who Eleven feels like she's allowed to see at any time, day or night, and so when the tub is full, she slips into the water without bothering to remove her clothes, pulls the blindfold over her eyes, and goes looking for her mother.

Eleven likes Joyce. She really does. A lot. But she doesn't want to forget that her Mama is still her Mama no matter what.

And this isn't even about her dad's relationship with Joyce, at least not solely. It's about everything else, too. New faces, new places, school, homework, the name *Jane*, teachers, students, three homes in two years, all the bizarre sights, sounds, smells, tastes...

Culture shock.

And then there's the *pyrokinesis*. Just like the Mind Flayer changes people from the inside out, El feels like the new world has seeped inside her, too, and mixed everything up. Taken a piece of her away and replaced it with something else. Something she's not used to and doesn't understand and makes her feel less like herself.

Honestly, finding Mama is just the means to an end. The real goal is *finding* her, because if El tries hard enough, really puts her mind to it, then maybe her old powers will come back. Maybe not everything has to be different. Maybe she can hold on to one tiny piece of familiar. One part of the world she recognizes.

One normal thing.

She doesn't feel it working, exactly. At least, not working the way it used to. Her senses not quite deprived, El can still feel the water and the sides of the bathtub, and she can hear the low hum of the fan above the light, and she can smell the distinct scent of a recently-cleaned bathroom.

But at the same time... *something's* happening.

She's not in the void but feels like she's on the edge of reaching it. El dips her head underwater, knowing she has very little time before she has to surface for air, but beneath the surface her senses are dulled

even further than the blindfold can achieve solo, and she thinks if she can just push herself a little further, then she can...

Suddenly, she's yanked out of the water and the blindfold is ripped off her face. Hopper's in front of her, holding tight to her arm, and before Eleven can get her feet under her, he drags her out of the bathtub and out of the bathroom.

She thinks at first that he's angry.

And then she realizes: their house is on fire.

Not on fire the way the coffee table was on fire. On fire the way that people in movies have to leave everything behind and run out of the building before they burn up, too. Flames crawl up the walls and along the floor, sprout out of the couch and TV, make part of the ceiling collapse in the kitchen. Thick smoke stings El's eyes and throat, and Hop's hold on her is like a vice as they book it out of the trailer.

Wrenching the front door open causes a backdraft that shatters the windows, and Hopper pushes El in front of him, shielding her from the flying glass, as they stumble their way out to the gravel, next to the truck, not quite believing what's happening.

From the outside, the blazing orange is a stark contrast against the night. The entire trailer is engulfed, with a column of dark smoke rising high above the trees.

Even Eleven can tell there's no saving it. Their home is destroyed. And it's her fault.

"Are you hurt?" Hop asks, the desperation in his voice making it sound less like a question and more like a demand. El registers the words but can't turn her attention away from the flames. Hop holds her face in his hands and forces her to look at him. "Are you hurt?" he repeats.

She shakes her head, and the relief that cascades off him is so heavy that for a moment he sags.

"Get in the truck," he tells her.

As she climbs into the passenger seat, Hopper gets in behind the steering wheel. He throws the truck into reverse and backs up until they're out of the danger zone but still in sight of the trailer. Then he gets on the radio and calls for the fire department.

Eleven, horrified, watches their home burn.

That's everything they own. Clothes, furniture, food, their safe place to sleep at night. Gone. Presents from Christmas last year, stuff her friends had given her to help decorate her room, Hop's stuff from before he even knew her. Gone. Textbooks, homework, all her school supplies. Gone. Movies, cassettes, comic books. Gone. The bare spot in the carpet. The squeaky bathroom door. The chipped windowpane.

Gone.

The tears in her eyes spill over, and when she exhales, it comes out as a sob. Hop, still talking to dispatch, reaches over and squeezes her shoulder, like that's going to make her feel better.

One good thing about crying is that Eleven doesn't have to see the destruction she's caused.

In the lab, they wanted a weapon. Maybe they got what they wanted.

The radio chatter ends, and Hop sets down the receiver. His hand moves from her shoulder to her back, and El almost wishes he would yell at her. That would be easier to handle, she thinks, than the kindness she's getting. "Hey, it's okay."

"Sorry," she whispers. It sounds pathetically inadequate.

"It's just stuff, kid. It's just stuff. It's not important." Her clothes are still wet, and she shivers in spite of the warm night made warmer by the heat from their burning house. Hop turns up the fans in the truck, and hot air shoots out of the vents. "Can I ask, what were you trying to do?"

"I –," There's a lot she was trying to do. Mostly she was trying to get her old powers back, which now is obvious was a big failure. Mostly she was also trying to avoid any complicated conversations with Hopper. She still doesn't want him to worry about her. "I wanted to

see Mama.”

“This isn’t your fault. Do you understand?”

“No,” she says, her voice breaking as fresh tears form and she leans forward, arms folded around her head, ducking low beneath the glove compartment.

“El.” She ignores him. Doesn’t look up. “El.” Both his hands are on her now, grabbing her by the shoulders and trying to bring her back into a sitting position. She resists. “Come on, kid.”

Sirens approach, softly at first and then louder, and El, who’s still staring at the floor, imagines a crew of firefighters driving several fire engines right by their truck and up to the trailer. She knows firefighters wear bulky, fireproof clothing and use huge garden hoses to put out fires, and for a second she pretends that maybe they can somehow save their house. That she’ll look out the window and it’ll turn out that all her misery was for nothing because everything is all right.

(She used to pretend in the lab, too. Pretend that things wouldn’t hurt, that she wouldn’t be scared, that it would be over soon.)

“I gotta go talk to the firefighters,” Hop tells her. El doesn’t respond. “Just say ‘OK’ so I know you hear me.”

“Okay,” she mutters.

“Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

He lets go of her and Eleven hears the door open and close. Alone, she sniffs and wipes her eyes. Finally daring to look up and out the window, the fire engines now block most of her view, but she can still make out the flash of water arcing over the trailer from one of the long hoses. Nearby, Hop talks to one of the firefighters.

How bad is it? she imagines Hop asking. *Really, really bad,* she imagines the fireman answering.

The door opens and closes again as Hop gets back in the truck. “You all right?” El keeps quiet, her gaze drawn to the activity in front of

their house. Of what used to be their house. “Kid, can you talk to me?”

“Homeless.”

“We’re not homeless.”

El’s been homeless before. No bed and no TV. Sleeping on the ground. Cold. Hungry. Eating animals like rabbits or the rats with bushy tails. “We *are* homeless.”

“Take a deep breath.”

Eleven takes several and none of them seem to help. Hop starts the truck again and backs away from the fire engines, turning as he does and pointing them toward the main road. “Where are we going?” she asks miserably.

“Somewhere we can hopefully stay for a little while. Until we find a new place to live.”

“Cabin?” There’s nothing in the cabin, since they moved all their furniture to the trailer. And there’s no guarantee that Eleven won’t accidentally destroy the cabin, too.

“If we have to. But I’d rather keep that a secret, if we can.”

Staring out the window into the darkness, El wishes they were home and that she never tried to find the void or get her old powers back. She wishes she would have just accepted the stupid fire powers in the first place, like everyone else seems to.

She wishes nothing ever had to change at all.

According to the clock in Hop’s truck, it’s just after 3 o’clock in the morning when he and El get to the Byers house. They park by Joyce’s car, and Eleven trudges behind Hopper to the porch. He knocks on the front door. Aggressively.

No answer.

He knocks again. *Very* aggressively.

Finally, a light in the house comes on and Joyce comes to the door, a mixture of shock and alarm on her face as she takes in the appearances of her middle-of-the-night visitors: Eleven, red-eyed and soaking wet, Hopper, exhausted, and the thick, musty, unmistakable smell of smoke and fire.

“Our house burned down,” Hop says. “Can we come in?”